

# CARTE ITALIANE

A Journal of Italian Studies

Volume 8                      1986-87

Department of Italian, UCLA



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## Preface

The articles presented in this year's issue of *Carte Italiane* are all—some more directly than others—dedicated to the topic: Feminism/Women Writers/Femininity. We are grateful to *Carte Italiane* for giving us the opportunity to respond to the much felt need for such an inquiry. We hope that the questions raised by and in this issue serve to encourage further discussion.

We wish to thank the Italian Department and the Graduate Student Association for their generous contributions, as well as the graduate students of the Italian Department without whom this journal would not be possible. We thank Luisa Del Giudice and Pasquale Verdicchio, past editors of *Carte Italiane*, and our Chairman, Franco Betti. We also wish to thank Marga Cottino-Jones, Teresa De Lauretis, and Biancamaria Frabotta for their encouragement.

The Editors

Susanna Ferlito and Lori Repetti





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## *The Advertisement: New-feminist Re-readings and Old-fashioned Triangles in the Dramaturgy of Natalia Ginzburg*

The generation that took an active part in the new-feminist movement of the seventies is at the center of the stage in the dramaturgy of Natalia Ginzburg. Like Hellman, Ginzburg focuses on the examination of the dynamics of gender in intimate family microcosms, rather than paying direct attention to macroscopic aspects of the women's movement, such as the demonstrations that were happening in most western countries in the years in which Ginzburg wrote her plays.

It has been noted that in *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman's last play, one senses the imminence of a new feminist age. But in that play the proto-new-feminist character Lily is isolated from her generation. Feminism for Hellman is an underscoring motif that hovers behind the reality of the play, but a similar motif becomes the propelling force in the plays of Natalia Ginzburg, an established Italian writer of the same generation as Hellman, who started working for the theatre only in the late sixties, precisely as a result of the new-feminist influence.

In Natalia Ginzburg's plays the gender-definitions pressed by the dominant culture in the conservative mid-century era individually shape expectations and collectively channel desires. But the presence of numerous female characters of the new generation prefigures the momentum that the women's movement was about to take, and liberates the women's homo-erotic desires in the microcosms examined.

Like Lillian Hellman's, Natalia Ginzburg's dramaturgy is atypical for women's theatre. Similarly to her American predecessor, Ginzburg observes the new-feminism from the distance of one generation, and has a more tempered vision of it than her younger contemporaries. Contrary to Hellman, who wrote her last play in 1961, Ginzburg remained

an active playwright during all the salient years of the new-feminist movement. But while Hellman was an experienced playwright when she wrote *Toys in the Attic*, Ginzburg had established herself as a novelist in the post-war years and was new to the theatre when the new-feminism started.

Her women contemporaries in the United States were much younger white new-feminists, working in experimental collectives involved in protest theatre, mainly concerned with rape and abortion, the two catalyst new-feminist issues. More often than not these writers used abstract beliefs and utopian visions to approach their subjects. Black-American women writers drew powerful female characters who show a more disenchanted view of feminism, but at this time they still concentrated primarily on racial tensions.

The established French novelists who had turned to theatre under the new-feminist impulse produced more sophisticated forms of writing, but wrapped the dynamics of gender under complex layers of absurdist symbolism. Ginzburg, on the contrary, uses the absurdist canvas to portray women at the top of their communicative powers.

The translation of her last novel has confirmed Natalia Ginzburg's status among this country's reading public. Her anthologized essays, plays, short stories and novels have long since been favorites of Italian students and teachers. *The Little Virtues*, a newly translated essay-collection, is favorably reviewed in the top newspapers of this country. This diffused interest for Ginzburg in America suggests her international reputation could be due to a genderized response of the public. As a consequence it is appropriate to look back at her plays, that were written between 1965 and 1975, and could have determined the influence of feminism in her writing.

Natalia Ginzburg's dramaturgy gives evidence of the suggested hypothesis that gender difference in writing cannot be formally defined. Scholars who propose a structural answer to the questions "what is the difference? and why study it?" are naturally bound to find that men from a country other than their own, or from an ethnicity other than their own, do things similar to what they had defined as the specific structures of women's playwrighting. Likewise, women from a country other than the United States may do things similar to what Ameri-

can feminist scholars had thought of as "masculine" dramatic structures. But if one uses the subject of a work to begin an aesthetic analysis comprehensive of theme and form, one can show that Ginzburg's theatre has an important place in the continuum unfolding of women's dramaturgy.

Commentators of her literary beginnings just took her for granted as the virtuoso "token" woman of the Italian post-Fascist literary environment. Local critics acknowledged a promising talent, but none spent time on the influence of gender in her writing. Italian criticism being still a male province at the time, Ginzburg's thematics automatically came across as "less relevant."

With the new-feminism, her narratives have attracted a number of female commentators outside and inside her country. These critics have focused their analysis on style and rhythms. Her prose is rhythmically based on a staccato pace and on an abundance of vowels. Her thematic organization functions on stinging humorous bits that intercept the pace, and metaphors on temporality and death that cut across the rhythms creating emotional vertigo. This common denominator of thirty years of writing reflects her contemplative poetic personality and her drive to hide in the observer's corner and unfold the stories of apparent "others" as a means to establish the writer's power to survive them. New-feminist critics have formally described her rhythms and accents, but it takes an aesthetic emphasis on dramaturgy to define the dynamics of gender in her writing.

Her absurdist canvases could easily be viewed as a surrender to "masculine" structures. In the seventies the absurdist form was more than established, especially if compared to the "transformational" experiments of new-feminist collectives in this country. Ginzburg's focus on the microscopic dimension of gender-dynamics, rather than on external manifestations of the new-feminism, has been simplistically related to a generic Italian backwardness. But the analysis of Ginzburg's thematics shows that she consistently brings forth the desires of women, their world of erotic projections and the crucial moments of their collective experience. In this perspective she comes across as the writer who encompasses new-feminism in a visionary perception.

Born before the dawn of Fascism in the World War One period, she

had been through a lot when the women's movement became a prominent force on the Italian scene in the mid-seventies. To define her perspective on women we need to glance at the specifics of the Italian feminist movement. Due to rapid and mass development of the industrial system, in the early seventies Italy had an incidence of illegal abortions and broken marriages higher than most Western countries. Birth-control, officially not permitted, was somewhat diffusely practiced, but, while contraceptives circulated under the official heading of headache remedies, a rapidly industrializing country still had no legal divorce or abortion system. Back-room abortions and illegitimacy had become a way of life automatically.

When the liberal left timidly proposed a cautious set of regulations, it faced immediate resistance from the conservative side of the country. The right wings in alliance with the church establishment set out on a campaign to demand the abrogation of the new laws granting divorce and birth-control rights, by popular referendum. The situation gave a tremendous momentum to the rank and file of local feminism. On the issues of both divorce and abortion the country became politically polarized, and a large majority of the people voted for two times in a row side to side with the women's movement. Italian feminism acquired a clear conscience of its powers: in moving the public opinion from a preindustrial to a post-modern view of the family, Italian feminists felt for a while that they had in their hands the destiny of their country.

A combination of social, historical, religious and economic factors thus made the impact of Italian feminism particularly dramatic. Natalia Ginzburg was affected by this impact, but maintained a sober standpoint and a controlled distance. In 1973 she was a regular contributor to the *terza pagina* of two major liberal newspapers. Questioned about *la condizione femminile*, she answered:

Non amo il femminismo. Condivido però tutto quello che chiedono i movimenti femminili. Condivido tutte o quasi le loro richieste pratiche. (*Vita immaginaria*, p. 183.)

Feminism obscurely appeared to her in the beginning as a new form

of reversed, self-defeating racism. She saw its origins in an age old "inferiority complex" of women, that gave a "secret complicity" as its questionable result. She thought that for feminism to become a positive force in the complex of society the implications of that secret complicity had to be sorted out.

In her eight plays Natalia Ginzburg used the absurdist model and catered from the existential tradition. Being already established as a novel writer, she could afford to stay away from the avant-garde experimentations that were becoming popular among her younger women compatriots. The first woman ever to write for the Italian theatre, she put her plays in the mainstream circuits, and used well-known directors and actors. As happened to Lillian Hellman in America a few decades earlier, she used established dramatic forms to concentrate on significant moments of women's collective experience. But while absurdism forms the canvas of her theatre, her dramaturgy follows the desire to explore the dynamics of gender in her contemporary environment.

*The Advertisement* for instance (original title *L'inserzione*, literally "the classified ad"), examines the microscopic dimension of the general tensions that gave origin to the new feminism. Teresa is the typically "backward" woman of pre- or de-industrialized societies, who depends on marriage for social status. Deserted by her husband, she starts living with Elena, a female student ten years her younger, who becomes entrenched in the tales of her tumultuous life. The two women become mutual supports and sources of self-assurance for each other, until the student falls in love with Teresa's ex-husband.

A confused, still unconscious and inarticulated homosexuality appears as a major motivation of the two women's alliance, although the author makes it unacknowledged by the characters. Mostly due to the diffused influence of cheap Freudian psychoanalysis, the level of intimacy reached by the two women had previously come across in drama as neurosis or insanity caused by a frustrated heterosexuality. By this middle-aged Italian writer who glances at the new-feminism from one generation behind, the psycho-erotic bond between the two female characters it is now newly regarded as the microscopic seed that gave

origin to the collective new-feminist action. As in the memoirs, however, Ginzburg suggests that there is no solid alliance until the real motivations are collectively acknowledged and surpassed.

From her chosen distance the established writer looks at the formation of feminism in the new alliances that discard the conventional hierarchies that govern gender-roles in society. Under the new-feminist influence, the traditional triangle becomes a microcosm that reveals the gender-dynamics that are at stake in society. The defeat of the new alliance (when Elena leaves Teresa to live with Teresa's ex-husband), reflects Ginzburg's reticence to accept this influence. But the homoerotic basis of the alliance suggests that the writer developed a sharper and a more articulated consciousness of gender as she wrote for the theatre. In *L'inserzione* absurdity is used to present the betrayed complicity that re-establishes the gender hierarchies threatened by the women's alliance in the beginning of the play.

The youngest child of a middle-class half-Jewish family, Ginzburg had absorbed her father's view that "there [was] nothing, absolutely nothing that one could do against Fascism" except undo it by the strength of one's resilience, and still be there to tell the story after its fall. Married to a left-wing Russian-Jewish political activist, who was killed in a prison cell after the World War Two armistice, she had made the best of her wifely exile when the regime had sent him to political confinement. Her "Eboli" is rendered as a remote paradise in the pages that evoke its memories, but the memoir breaks the image of the happy family with Natalia's first and atrocious encounter with death:

Mio marito morì a Roma nelle carceri di Regina Coeli, pochi mesi dopo che avevamo lasciato il paese. Davanti all'orrore della sua morte solitaria, davanti alle angosciose alternative che precedettero la sua morte, io mi chiedo se questo è accaduto a noi, a noi che compravamo le arance da Giro e andavamo a passeggiare nella neve. Allora io avevo fiducia in un avvenire facile e lieto, ricco di desideri appagati, di esperienze e di comuni imprese. Ma era quello il tempo migliore della mia vita e solo adesso che mi è sfuggito per sempre, solo adesso lo so. (*Le piccole virtù*, p. 18-19.)

Bereaved at such an early age and being left a young widow at the end of a second war, the only parent of three small children, she became

interested in a particular kind of character. Her women have lower-class, rural, humble origins, but a tremendous drive to project themselves out in the environment, and a talent for living intensely, and being intensely loved. If they are narcissistic, self-conscious, extremely difficult women, in her dramaturgy one finds that their desires are the cement of society. Like Lillian Hellman, therefore, Natalia Ginzburg is not concerned with feminists, but with ordinary, non-professional and often non-educated women, who obstinately resist the conforming pressures of society. Playwrighting is a parenthesis of her creative life that incidentally coincides with the new-feminist period. After this parenthesis she returned to fiction, but drama put her in touch with the generation formed at the intense experience of the new-feminism, and this understanding became the backbone of her later narratives.

Her activity as one of the most prominent Italian novelists since the forties can be briefly summarized. A series of *romanzi brevi*, written in the pre- and post-war period, started her out as the representative of the *gentil sesso* in a group of left-wing Jewish-Italian *letterati*, among the country's prime liberal intellectuals. A cross between the *novella* and a regular novel, the *romanzo breve* is a swift, condensed, undorned, narrative conveying the viewpoint of a *voce femminile* in a fable based on a collective protagonist and characterized by Ginzburg's distinctive staccato rhythm and naive accents. *Lessico familiare* (1963), a full-length novel of family life and anti-Fascism, brought national recognition.

Her recent, enchanting, intriguing and sad novels show how drama changed the perspectives of her narrative. From *Caro Michele* (1973) to *La città e la casa* (1983) the epistolary form progressively takes over the traditional narrative. In *La città e la casa* this allows the novel to follow a plot that develops from central Italy to the Eastern coast of this country. The author examines the links that her characters establish between the two continents, and uses the deeds of the new generation to embrace the theme of the ongoing flux over the Atlantic. As in theatre, the composition relies on purely dialogical patterns, and the author uses different registers to pitch on various levels the voices of her characters.

*L'inserzione*, a play written in 1965 that premiered in 1968, occupies

a somewhat central position in the whole development of Ginzburg's dramaturgy. Lighthearted farce is the initial tone of her dramatic period, which sees traditional gender-roles respected and upper-class, conventional mores satirized. In *Ti ho sposato per allegria*, for instance, the effrontery of Giuliana, a young female character from the working-class, is a vivifying force in the play's milieu. Her adventurous and unpredictable temperament stands in contrast to her upper-class in-laws, sister and mother. Giuliana's maid has adopted conventional manners to be on the safe side, and she strangely mimics the rigidity of Giuliana's in-laws. Giuliana's influence begins to be felt in the environment, but her alliance with the maid keeps the scope of the satire on the social level. A darker tone in the later plays is conducive of the suffocating atmosphere imposed, despite feminism, by the impinging economic crisis. In *La porta sbagliata* a confused, unacknowledged anxiety hovers over a disappointed baby-boom generation that has reversed gender and class conventions, but feels itself to be of no use to an unevenly developed society. With its oblique humor and its diffused anxiety, *L'inserzione* finds in between these two its dramatic balance.

*L'inserzione* brought Ginzburg to the international attention of feminist scholars of the theatre. Partly as a result of this attention, the play has since been periodically revived, translated, taught and anthologized. A controversial view of Italian women is the basis of its popularity. Its London premiere suggest that the script had a provocative potential with respect to the Italian public. The success of its production in Europe rested on the assumption that the plays' protagonist realistically corresponded to the Italian type. But when *L'inserzione* finally opened in Italy, the protagonist's role was purposely played as a neurotic not to disturb the local public.

Formal assessments of the play by non-feminist writers range from absurdist, to tragic farce, to comedy of sentiment and of manners. The compulsive talkativeness of Teresa is invariably seen as its subject. This emphasis on the protagonist narrows the perspective of Ginzburg's dramaturgy: the play uses the conventional triangle to examine gender dynamics in the power struggle of a couple.



Teresa and Lorenzo have managed for a year to live apart from each other. After five years in a contrasted, tempestuous, but tremendously passionate marriage, they have regained their mental balance and now periodically visit each other.

A beginner in writing for the stage, Ginzburg is still very dependent on the narrative. Her borrowing from the absurdist model gives a neurotic slant to the characters, but the play deconstructs the absurdist model because it shows verbal flows as erotic channels between characters. The first act develops as Teresa, who now lives alone and retreated in her apartment, responds to the calls for the three classified ads that she placed in the local paper to regain some touch with reality. She wants to sell her villa and her antique sideboard, and find an aupair to share the apartment. She would prefer a student, to bring a fresher breeze in the stagnant air of her retirement. She definitely wants a woman, to stand on an equal footing and enjoy a discrete presence in the apartment.

Teresa's talkativeness is a form of desire by which she projects herself onto others. As she steps through the door, an inordinate verbal flow invests Elena, the university student who is interested in moving to the apartment. As she keeps asking questions, Elena is slowly caught in a spell by the other character. Predictably, Teresa concentrates on Lorenzo, and gives the details of the terrible roughs that brought the separation, sought and warmly fostered by the upper middle-class family of the husband. From her story one gathers the impression that these two people did not know how to deal with each other: on the one hand their marriage was based on a liberated and frankly physical passion, on the other they could not find ways in which this relationship could become socially positive for each other. They mostly wound up in crazed situations because of trite expectations of each other. For instance, the prospect of a countryside wealthy tranquillity made Lorenzo invest all his money in a pretentious villa. When Teresa found out that she did not care for that wifely quiet, they came back to Rome and lived on fast-food in an empty apartment.

An anonymous caller for a classified ad, Elena is transformed into an addicted spectator of Teresa's story-telling in less than one act. In

the crescendo of questions that Elena asks Teresa about her married life one reads her growing power on the other character. In speaking of their childhood the two women also reinforce the bond that is growing between them. Their experiences in their respective families, as little girls growing up in the years of the backlash, are strikingly similar. Both Teresa and Elena come from rural backgrounds and had powerless, exploited, hard-working mothers. They felt like second-class citizens in their families because they were placed second to their brothers. They spent their teen-age years thinking of ways to escape the drab perspective of a woman's life in the country. While Elena moved to Rome in the sixties and had access to education thanks to the liberal climate, Teresa, not much older than Elena, had moved ten years earlier, with the improbable project of becoming an actress. But in the fifties she found a still conservative, prudish, extremely misogynist climate. A number of shots as an extra in the growing local film industry suggested to her that even the more liberal movie world was remaining insensitive to her charms. If she had failed as an actress, she had at least taken care of herself enough to avoid the streets by finding a husband.

Act one thus concludes on a positive note for the two women: Teresa's story wins the respect of the other character, and Elena moves in with the understanding that they will give mutual support to each other. Both women are too primitive in their assessment of their sexuality, to realize that the strength of this bond is based on a physical attraction for each other. But the timidity and fundamental anxiety of the two characters suggest that the author deliberately leaves the possibility open that the two could fall in love with each other.

The feminist influence at this point can be regarded as the propelling force of the play: Natalia Ginzburg's curiosity about the two women's alliance manifests the writer's desire to be included in the "secret complicity" that she questions in the memoir.

The second part of the play goes into a reverse gear and shows more of the author's generational reticence vis-a-vis the new-feminism. When Lorenzo arrives in the second act, a casual visit rapidly transforms into a scene of seduction, as he feels his former role threatened by the new partnership. A sense of ownership of the women's place exudes from his gestures in the apartment. His presence breaks the quiet, intimate

balance that the women had established. In talking to Elena, he gathers a sense of power from presenting himself as the unquestioned center of Teresa's desires. In speaking of their marriage, he demeans Teresa's image in the eyes of the new partner. Act two concludes on Teresa's silence while Lorenzo wins Elena to his powers.

In a short exchange with Lorenzo, while Teresa is still out, Elena naively acknowledges the mutual support, much beyond the *aupair* relationship, that the two women are giving each other. But, as soon as the three are together, Lorenzo counterattacks by flirting with Elena. Lorenzo obviously capitalizes on Elena's naiveté, but Teresa stays out of his trite games of seduction, and actually outsmarts him by his own remarks. Being closely in touch with Elena has obviously made Teresa quite impassive to the power games of her husband; she is aware that his affected interest for her charming *aupair* is but a form of unconfessed jealousy for her new partnership.

The two women are alone again when Teresa is excluded from Elena's desires in the third act. Elena offers friendship in exchange for the annulment which—no divorce being possible—would regularize the status of the new couple: Teresa is condescending until Elena announces that her future visits will be not alone but with Lorenzo, and as a couple. Her rage explodes off stage, in an astounding but well prepared climax: she shoots her companion and calls Lorenzo to transfer the responsibility of her act.

The violent climax can be easily perceived as a structural echo of an existential type of violence, reconverted to murder from suicide, and, in the wake of the absurdist model, completely gratuitous and abstract. But the aesthetic analysis of gender and desire shows that Teresa, on the contrary, is reacting against the concrete loss of her newly found female friend and companion by the inconsiderate hand of her ex-husband. In the last scene the two women take leave of each other, while Teresa is expecting the calls for a new ad.

The absurdist canvas becomes threadbare in the cyclic finale that concludes the act. The door-bell rings and Teresa dries her eyes, runs to the door, and opens it for Giovanna, a prospective new *aupair*.

The Ionescan note leaves one to wonder what would happen if Giovanna decided to move in. The scene closes on Teresa, a defeated,

enigmatic and extremely powerful woman, who incarnates the new-feminist reality as it entered in the lives of most common people.

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## The Scarred Womb of the Futurist Woman

Although the Futurists acted very much in the spirit of a “male club”<sup>1</sup> and adopted a blatantly misogynistic rhetoric, several women joined the ranks of the movement and participated in all its fields of action, expressing their rebellion against traditional codes of behavior both in the personal and the artistic sphere. The first Futurist woman, Valentine de Saint Point, a Parisian painter and writer, proclaimed and celebrated an absolute sexual emancipation for women in two manifestos: the “Manifesto della Donna futurista” (1912), and the “Manifesto futurista della Lussuria” (1913). These texts railed against the hypocrisy and preconceptions of Christian morality, the mystifications of old and sterile sentimentality, as well as the political, “cerebral” mistake of Feminism.<sup>2</sup> Valorizing the stereotypical notion of the instinctive, irrational “essence” of woman by recasting it in the Futurist rhetoric of aggressive vitalism, Valentine de Saint Point celebrated woman as “the great galvanizing principle”<sup>3</sup> in the drive towards progress, a “sublimely unjust”<sup>4</sup> force of nature, playing a fundamental role in any revolution as well as in the process of natural selection. While reacting against Marinetti’s association of woman to the constraints of family, pacifism and sentimental love—obstacles to the heroic destiny of man,<sup>5</sup> she nevertheless reduced women’s ambitions to the complementary and mutually exclusive roles of the selfless mother and of the inspiring lover, two roles well within the scope of action traditionally reserved to women:

La donna deve essere madre o amante. Le vere madri saranno sempre amanti mediocri, e le amanti saranno madri insufficienti per eccesso. Uguali di fronte alla vita, queste due donne si completano. La madre che riceve il figlio fa, con del passato, dell'avvenire. L'amante dispensa il desiderio che trasporta verso il futuro.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, this first provocative and most belligerent proclamation of emancipation blazed also the limits of the subversive trail opened by the Futurist women.

Some of the women who later joined the movement displayed non-conformist attitudes and looked for emancipation from conventional feminine roles through the short-cut of imitating the Futurist model of the "superman." For instance, Fulvia Giuliani went around in Futurist demonstrations dressed like a captain of the "Arditi" (shock troops), and the "aeropitttrice" Barbara, unbeknownst to her parents, frequented an aeronautic club and became a pilot. After the war, some Futurist women even proposed the formation of groups of "Ardite."

Women writers in the movement, such as Rosa Rosa, Enif Robert, Eva Khun, Emma Malpillero and Benedetta, rebelled against the artistic and literary institutions and performed in "paroliberismo," "teatro sintetico," and "aereopoesia." The writer Maria Ginanni actually directed the paper "Italia futurista" during the war, and was active with Rosa Rosa and Enif Robert in a polemical debate against the most extreme misogynist attitudes of the men in the movement.

The works of the Futurist women were not divulged among a broad public and are now almost completely forgotten. In the rare instance of a study that addresses the topic, the critic tends to adopt a politically biased, dismissive attitude: great emphasis is placed on the reactionary political implications and affiliations of Futurism, and the women in the movement are seen as having a simply mimetic, entirely subordinated relation to the male Futurists.<sup>7</sup> I believe, instead, that the Futurist experience is a significant episode in women's activity on the Italian cultural and literary scene at the beginning of the twentieth-century: the only instance of Italian women's active participation in an avant-garde movement in the pre-war period. This experience, far from being entirely reducible to a mere imitation of the discourse of the

Futurist men, projects intimate contradictions, differences and conflicts, which are instead subdued in the mainstream Futurist production.

In what follows, I will offer an analysis of Enif Robert's experimental novel *Un ventre di donna: Romanzo chirurgico*,<sup>8</sup> a text raising questions that are relevant to an understanding of the Futurist women's production in general. I have proceeded in my study with two major concerns in mind: firstly, to plot the locus of the writer's cultural identity, identifying the forces that intersect her cultural field; secondly, to determine whether and at which level of the text we can speak of difference with respect to the predominantly male Futurist production.

Echoing Valentine de Saint Point's glorification of women's sexual freedom and Marinetti's attack on passèist literature, Enif Robert's novel *Un ventre di donna* proclaims loudly its emancipation from the conventions of the fashionable, predominant genre of feminine literature—the so-called “letteratura rosa”—and the dictates of bourgeois moralism. A manifesto-preface entitled “CORAGGIO + VERITÀ” launches an attack on women writers' sentimental literature: in the spirit of the avant-garde movements, characterized by an effort to reintegrate art into life,<sup>9</sup> Robert emphasizes the relationship between the two realms and rails against the hypocritical romantic rhetoric of contemporary feminine literature, as well as against the coy, mealy-mouthed women that it portrays and fosters:

Non più, per carità, sprecare tesori di bello stile per dirci che il sole è un amante divino, o che un giardino autunnale è capace di dare la vertigine del piacere più intenso!

Vien voglia, leggendo queste magnifiche cretinerie, di prendere per un braccio la fluttuante scrittrice, scuoterla ben bene per riportarla in pieno verismo quotidiano, e dirle forte: “No, cara: tu fai una sostituzione bestiale di pensieri e di cose. Un bel giovanotto dalle maschie fattezze è il tuo sole e il tuo giardino. (p.XII)<sup>10</sup>

Una bella signora mia amica era da molto tempo ammalata. A me, a tutti, raccontava di disturbi nervosi, di . . . febbri del pensiero (. . .) Il ridicolo dei suoi inauditi sforzi estetici per velare il suo vero male, uccise in me la compassione.

Trovo un formidabile nesso logico fra la mia amica languidissima, affetta da tumore rettale, e le scrittrici azzurre. E mi sono convinta che



una non ultima ragione di quelle sue pietose pose lastiche andava ricercata nel genere letterario ch'ella prediligeva. Libri, giornali, riviste, dove le donne letterate sfiorano "*con dita d'azzurro*" le più inconcludenti rarità del senso che vuol parere raffinatissimo e sedicente vibrante; dove la ricerca di snobismi spirituali è così intensa da raggiungere a volte incredibili spunti di ridicolo. (pp. XIV–XV)

The alternative programme proposed is an energetic Futurist treatment of courage and truth, a new feminine literature representing a new woman freed from the taboos of bourgeois moralism:

Ma di', dunque, con rude franchezza il tuo desiderio umano e carnale, quale te lo suggerisce la tua sensibilità legittima e consapevole; parla del tuo diritto sensuale e fecondo, senza impasticciarlo con analogie di raggi e di profumi assolutamente estranei alla tua nudità che canta l'amore. (p. XIII)

This passage (as Valentine de Saint Point's manifestos) sets the limits of the proposed revolutionary move within the boundaries of the sexual sphere. The assumption that women's desires and experiences are contained entirely in their erotic longings and sexual performance is still informed by the traditional vision of separate, preordained roles for men and women, with little or no overlap between their respective spheres, and with women subordinate ("Un bel giovanotto dalle maschie fattezze è il tuo sole e il tuo giardino," p. 12).

The manifesto-preface, however, does not set the limits of the experiences and ambitions that the novel actually dramatizes. In fact, the text constitutes a literary subject—the heroine-writer—and represents an idiosyncratic experience that do not exactly conform to the models forged by male-centered culture and literature, including the male Futurists' theoretical and creative writings. Alternating narration, diary and letters (mainly exchanged between the protagonist and Marinetti, who writes from the front), Enif Robert tells the presumably autobiographical, non-aesthetic experience of fighting a terrible disease affecting her womb. At the offset, the protagonist is characterized as an uncommon, self-willed woman,<sup>11</sup> who, as a young and beautiful widow, has refused to submit to social laws and familial expectations by not remarrying. Having started a relationship with a man which

is not sufficient to fulfill her desires and confused aspirations,<sup>12</sup> she suffers for the boredom of her uneventful life, as well as for the symptoms of a mysterious illness. Only the daring, impetuous courting of the genial, eccentric and athletic Futurist Biego Fortis—which the protagonist *subisce* with a mixture of conflicting feelings<sup>13</sup>—brings a wave of vitality into the slow, sleepy rhythm of her life. The woman's health continues to deteriorate until the disease is finally diagnosed and surgery is recommended as the only way to escape death. The representation of the ensuing events—surgery, the patient's convalescence in the hospital and her struggle with painful complications which prevent recovery—hinges on the themes of courage's victory over fear, the protagonist's loss of faith in science ("la scienza arcigna," p. 78), embodied by the surgeon nicknamed "Jack lo Sventratore" ("ironico, freddo, viscido," p. 83), and her growing faith in the therapeutic power of Futurism<sup>14</sup> which matures through readings and especially through an epistolary relationship with Marinetti. The Futurist leader, "forte e prezioso amico" (p. 127), "intuitore meraviglioso di forze latenti" (p. 129), advises a "Futurist treatment" (successively exposed in a "manuale terapeutico del desiderio-immaginazione" for the patient to memorize), which consists in increasing "i legami ardenti con la vita terrestre" (p. 124) through intensified desires. Putting into practice Marinetti's theory, the patient pursues an ambitious desire of artistic creativity ("desiderio di ebbrezze spirituali" p. 116) and writes about her surgical sensations in the Futurist style of "paroliberismo":

*Sensazioni Chirurgiche.*

bianco bianco bianco abbagliante chiarore di cielo di sole da finestroni lucenti [silenzio] piccole suore candidetacite sorridere di volti dolcissimi abitudine allo strazio quotidiano delle carni ammalate. Rabbrivire del corpo al contatto freddo del lettuccio di vetro—FREDDO—brivido della calda nudità e corrispondere dell'urto tortuoso al dorso al cuore forte battito vigile sospettoso . . . Affacciarsi della piccola infermiera pratica brutta rapida sicura [silenzio] a grandi caratteri nella parete in faccia. Entrare rigido agghiacciante della "Scienza" calva fredda arcigna ansioso colpo nel cuore. (. . .) (pp. 134–135).

Successively, the protagonist submits herself to a therapeutic intercourse with the sun ("Nuda nella mia vestaglia aperta, mi corico su una

sedia a sdraio e offro il mio ventre al sole. L'astro incandescente manifesta subito la sua meravigliosa brutalità incivile avventandosi con furia selvaggia e senza diplomazie sulla mia ferita" pp. 145–146). No final recovery is represented. Instead, responding to the patient's rebellious feelings against inaction and her desire to fight ("Vorrei alzarmi, andare in guerra, in trincea, sparare, uccidermi, finirla. Sono stuuuuufa!" p. 192), Marinetti's letters develop an extensive analogy between the "war" in the wounds of the woman's womb and the battles fought in the trenches that cut the "womb" of the earth on the front line:

Navigo, guazzo, remo nel fangobroda dei camminamenti, grassi, luridi intestini di questa pianura sventrata. Tutti questi corridoi di fango conducono all'unica vasta latrina: impero austroungarico. (p. 139)

Avete torto di temere il ritorno dei 40 gradi di febbre. Bisogna acclimatarsi al pericolo.

In fondo io sono nella stessa vostra situazione. Voi inchiodata in un letto; io in una trincea fangosa, sotto la possibile pericolosa simpatia d'una palla di mitragliatrice o di una granata del San Marco.

Io, però, giro nella mia trincea col petto gonfio d'orgoglio perché tengo a guinzaglio i miei nervi sotto le scivolanti volate della morte, che balla al piano superiore, lacerando agli alberi il suo strascico di seta (. . .) (p. 171)

The last two chapters extend the potential and actual threat of disease to the wombs of other women. In "Lotta di ventri femminili," the protagonist mentally strips women passing by and elaborates a feminine typology in the form of a typology of wombs, e.g.: the passèist intellectual,<sup>15</sup> the beautiful statuette<sup>16</sup> and the "matrona."<sup>17</sup> In "Il ventre di un'altra donna," instead, the drama of a woman affected by "putrefazione intestinale" is staged. Her husband's jealous protectiveness and the passèist doctors' pedantic opinion oppose a progressive doctor's surgical strategy. As the husband (by the symbolic name "principe Eutanasio De Ruderis," "cento volte milionario, avaro e maniaco" p. 209) assists to the parade of victorious troops, the doctors circle around the patient's bed in consultation. Suddenly, the crowd's outcry is heard, announcing that a Futurist "Ardito del 74° reparto d'assalto" (p. 217) has stabbed prince De Ruderis. In the emblematic

*finale*, the liberating gesture of the “Ardito giustiziere” (p. 217) is associated with the liberated gesture of the patient, as she proclaims her courageous choice of action:

Ma, nuda, energica e risoluta, la principessa uscì sul balcone e si sporse, gridando:

—Sono pronta! Operaaatemi!

E i soldati, dimentichi dell’assassino e dell’assassinato, applaudirono freneticamente, *senza stupore*, all’apparizione, pure tanto strana, di quella meravigliosa donna ignuda. (p. 218)

The preceding synopsis should already give an idea of how the protagonist’s needs and ambitions contradict the assumption underlying the preface that women’s wishes are exclusively dominated by love and erotic longings. In fact, in the heroine’s experience, ambitious wishes of entering the male spheres of war and artistic creativity manifest themselves alongside erotic ones. Furthermore, the story is structured as a series of conflicts: the protagonist’s defying society’s laws about marriage; her confronting and fighting the unaesthetic truth of the disease hidden in her womb (assimilated to the battles fought by men on the front); and her jealous, competitive attitude versus other women’s healthy wombs.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, all these conflicts appear to be a result of the intimate, fundamental rift experienced by the protagonist between her “masculine” will and her “feminine” body:

Ho certamente dell’ingegno. Nel guardare da questa finestra che beve tutto il golfo di Napoli, caldo, accecante e odoroso, io penso che sarei stata un poco pittore e un poco poeta, se fossi nata uomo. L’amore non mi basta. Mi sento veramente, in questo momento, poco donna.

Nulla di comune fra me e quelle flaccide, enormi matrone napoletane in costume da bagno, nere, viscide e stemperate come foché sulla sabbia, con la loro prole che guizza e bolle scodellata intorno.

Ricordo però la gioia profondamente carnale che provai otto giorni dopo il mio parto. (p. 4)

It is precisely this rift that qualifies the protagonist as an exceptional woman in her own eyes (“Ho i nervi di una donna non comune, nervi che pensano, vogliono” p. 7) and in the professional opinion of science:

Sento che i due medici, nell’andarsene, dicono a bassa voce:

—Essere stravagante . . . anormale. . . .

— . . . Resistenza fisica meravigliosa. Operazione necessarissima. . . .

— . . . Intelligenza che influenza il sangue . . . (p. 38)

—Ecco: per quanto sia difficile definirla, dirò che lei mi sembra un cervello troppo virile in un corpo troppo femminile . . . (p. 97)<sup>19</sup>

Thus the protagonist's story constitutes a transgression with respect to traditional representations of sexual roles and gender identity (or, in the case of woman, even lack of identity). However, the text blunts its potential subversiveness as the heroine associates her "deviance" (and implied superiority over the other women) with the virility of her spirit, while refusing identification with members of her sex. In fact, the same paradigms of qualities that shape Marinetti's (and traditional) opposition of masculinity and femininity also underlie any reference to gender identity in this text: in particular, the recurrent association of man with creativity, vitality, aggressiveness, and the insistent identification of the feminine nature with weakness, passivity and submissiveness. Tellingly, the womb attacked by a disease that destroys the biological "essence" of femininity—the reproductive function—becomes the emblem of woman's "constitutional" vulnerability and passivity: "Che schifo, essere un utero sofferente, mentre gli uomini si battono! E pensare che non ho nemmeno il coraggio di sopportare le iniezioni!" p. 25. Moreover, the female genitalia figure as the emblem of women's weakening influence over men:

Dio! Che orrore! Ecco un bellissimo alpino sconsigliatamente evirato! Ho pensato che le donne viennesi rivaleggiano con le etiopiche e divorano il sesso dei prigionieri italiani. . . .

La notte dopo, la mia immaginazione si sedeva alla tavola di un arciduca, fra due elegantissimi ventri di duchesse inguainati da *toilettes* parigine che ad un tratto esplosero. (pp. 179–170)

In this passage, a moment in the treatment of "desiderio-immaginazione," the protagonist's imagination identifies the enemy's threat with the castrating power of the Austrian and Ethiopic women. And, by the same token, the explosive counterattack of Italian virility is directed against elegantly "armour-plated" women's wombs. It is easy to recognize the kinship of these images with the old fiction of the castrating, abject<sup>20</sup> woman, and especially with its Futurist version: Marinetti's representation of woman as a threat to progress, courage,

virile determination. Especially in the texts that construct the myth of the Futurist superman, woman is figured again and again as a weakening and contaminating agent, which has to be dispensed with in order to pursue a religion of "Volontà estrinsecata" and "Eroismo quotidiano."<sup>21</sup> The most emblematic and extreme embodiment of this ideal is Marinetti's fictional hero Mafarka, who creates his superman son Gazurmah "senza il concorso e la puzzolente complicità della matrice della donna."<sup>22</sup> Here is an excerpt from Mafarka's Futurist speech, where the apostle of the new religion announces that the lust for heroic death is to replace the lust for woman:

Anch'io ebbi sere d'amore nelle quali mi piacque bendarmi gli occhi con le fresche braccia di una vergine . . . E affondavo il capo fra seni profumati, per non più vedere i rimorsi multiformi che si ergevano come nubi sull'orizzonte! . . . Sì! l'amore, la donna . . . tutto ciò può nascondere per un momento il cielo e colmare il pozzo dello spazio! (. . .) Fra le braccia delle donne io sentivo il ricordo delle debolezze diurne strisciarmi sui piedi, giungermi al cuore, tasteggiandomi i nervi snodati e febbrili, mentre la mia immaginazione aveva balzi deliziosi e dorati al volo fuggitivo delle sensazioni . . . Tutto questo è il veleno della vita! (. . .) Finalmente, eccomi quale volevo essere: votato al suicidio e pronto a generare il Dio che ognuno porta nelle proprie viscere!<sup>23</sup>

This construction of femininity, compounding connotations of impurity, corruption, limitation, and sensuality, can be read as a figure for the threats (ultimately the blurring of sexual difference) which menace (male) identity from within the self: threats that must be repressed in order for the "God" carried in every man to be born.

Robert's text seems also to echo, in more than one way, Moebius's *L'inferiorità mentale della donna*,<sup>24</sup> a classic in the tradition of "scientific" misogynist literature, which enjoyed a wide popularity at the time when Robert was writing. In this study, on the basis of anatomical observations, Moebius speaks of "deficienza mentale fisiologica della donna" (IM, p. 4) and claims that "ogni progresso è opera dell'uomo," while "la donna gli grava addosso come un plumbeo peso" (IM, p. 9). Since women, by their nature, are destined to love and maternity, they do not have any intellectual talent; when they do, he argues, it is therefore a "talento mascolino" (IM, p. 57). For Moebius, the woman who violates natural and social laws by aspiring to individual realization is

an abnormal being ("l'individualismo della donna non è possibile che sopra una base morbosa," (IM, p. 52)), and this transgression is deemed so terrible as to justify the following diagnosis: "se viene meno al suo obbligo verso la specie e vuole viverla la sua vita individuale, viene colpita come da una maledizione" (IM, p. 18). Aside from the more obvious analogies—the assumption that any intellectual talent is "mascolino," that any woman endowed with it is "anormale" and that progress is synonymous with man—one could see an even more disquieting link between the two texts: the drama of the protagonist—the struggle of a female non-conformist individualist against a mysteriously powerful disease—seems to fulfill the verdict-diagnosis of the misogynist author.

These examples illustrate how Robert reinscribes traditional, male-centered values while representing an experience of transgression. The fundamental ambivalence that underlies the central theme of the protagonist's exceptionality can also be found in other collateral issues thematized by the novel: in particular, the themes of maternity, marriage, and sexual life. In spite of a contemptuous representation of the Neapolitan "matrone" and their "prole," the protagonist expresses maternal feelings and concerns for her son Carlino,<sup>25</sup> and great distress about her lost fertility:

Non mi lasci dunque nemmeno ridere, odioso nemico rifugiato là dove dovrebbe solo palpitare un largo fiore fecondo?! Tu mordi i miei figli, quelli che aspetterei formarsi sotto il getto raggianti della creazione. (p. 201)

Analogously, in spite of the initial stance against marriage, the novel basically represents a monogamous relationship with the man whose love is avowedly insufficient to satisfy the protagonist's desires:<sup>26</sup> in fact, the only instance of "betrayal" is in the daydream, metaphorical dimension of the therapeutic intercourse with the sun:

È un amplesso avvolgente e una lacerazione insieme.

Ogni poro del mio ventre è una bocca che si apre, trema, e vorrebbe fuggire. (. . .) Tutto il sole, più vasto della terra, è nella mia ferita. Intorno, si allargano dei centri concentrici di calore decrescente, tagliati da deliziosi pruriti, e tutt'in giro ai fianchi circola una delicatissima frangia di lievissimi spasimi.

Sono spasimi di piacere, velati da sfumature di dolore. Ma il calore solare li domina, li nutre e li consola come l'affetto domina, nutre e consola le brutalità nell'amore e nei giochi violenti.

Mi sento affondare in una semi-incoscienza di svenimento, sotto la potenza massiccia del fuoco solare. (p. 146)<sup>27</sup>

This passage is worth lingering on, since it raises the question of possible analogies with the imagery and language which Robert criticizes in her initial tirade against sentimental literature "a base di erotismi mascherati di grazie cesellatrici" (p. XII). In fact, this daydream is a fetichistic sublimation of the erotic act which appears to be analogous to the "sostituzione bestiale di pensieri e di cose" (p. XIII) railed against in the preface ("Non più, per carità, sprecare tesori di bello stile per dirci che il sole è un amante divino, o che un giardino autunnale è capace di dare la vertigine del piacere più intenso!" p. XII-XIII). Actually, in substance, Robert reinscribes the same idea of feminine passive submission to the divinely powerful masculine force, and displaces erotic desires in a scene of interaction with an anthropomorphic natural element. Here, however, the process of transfer is not even thinly disguised: the writer, using blatantly erotic language, refused the moralistic restraints and the "graceful" rhetoric of feminine "letteratura-fremito" (p. XII).

The quoted passage is by no means an isolated instance. The sun is repeatedly personified as the divine lover and endowed with features of the ideal man mythicized by the Futurist movement:

Ora c'è il sole, *Padrone* assoluto, testardo, solenne, cocciuto, che accarezza e stringe tutte le curve, penetra in tutte le bocche della lasciva marina posseduta, che gode imbevuta di lui. (p. 22)

#### IL SOLE<sup>28</sup>

Dimentica te stesso . . . Slegati . . . Sciogli le tue paure. . . . Apriti. . . . Colerà una lava di forza nella tua forma convessa levigata succosa di frutto. (p. 148)

#### IL VENTRE

Perdonami; sono tuo; fa' di me ciò che vuoi. Sono quasi liberato da ogni coscienza. (. . .) Taglia! Ferisci! Lacera! Dilania! Spalanca! Sarò tuo a brandelli. Tuo! Infilzami! O stritolami! Carbonizzami! Così! Ancora! Ancora! . . . (p. 149)



Il ventre del mare aveva semplicemente partorito un delfino. O meglio un virilissimo membro divino si era insanguinato sverginando quella solitaria rada-ventre, che ora si assopiva, violazzurraverde, nella penombra umidissima. (p. 152)

Le nuvole erano vere bende di ferito, sul viso eroico, violento irruente del sole. (p. 153)

Comparing these passages with the following excerpts from Marinetti's writings, one can see that, just as she experiments in Marinetti's Futurist aesthetics of "paroliberismo," Robert frequently echoes his brash language, his rhetoric of militaristic and erotic violence, and the sadomasochistic connotations of descriptions where death and eros are identified:

Colpire col cannone equivale a un ardente amore epistolare: non si vede però, né si sente la lontanissima bocca baciata. Colpire con le bombarde, invece, equivale ad un furioso amplesso radiotelegrafico o, meglio, ad un bacio telefonico. (p. 140)<sup>29</sup>

Mafarka correva or qua or là, sulle creste degli scogli, eccitando alla voluttà di morire tutte quelle vite che si contorcevano in delizie sul corpo sussultante della grande Dea nera. (. . .) Egli aveva la voce rauca e singhiozzante dell'uomo che a forza di carezze spinge la carne della sua amante adorata verso uno spasimo terribile, dicendole: "Godi! Godi, amore mio! . . . Godi dappertutto! . . . Nelle tue mammelle e nelle tue bocche rosee! . . . Tu soffri dal piacere, non è vero? . . . Oh! soffri ancora! . . ." <sup>30</sup>

Having observed that Robert reinscribes traditional and Futurist male-centered values couching them in a rhetoric of Marinettian flavor, we can not simply conclude that the text does not differ in any significant way from the production of the other male Futurist writers. The more obvious difference is to be located at the level of thematic structures, which are traversed by the fundamental intimate rift experienced by the protagonist. Given the ambivalence associated with her exceptional status (hysterical behavior, diseased body, confused gender identity), the protagonist is not an exceptional individual in the way that Marinetti's Futurist superman is. Texts by male futurist writers typically tend to construct the myth of a virile, self-assertive and aggressive individual emancipated from all intimate and external limitations.

Problematization is eschewed by defining the new hero in antithesis with passeist values and femininity, i.e., by casting out both the female and the effeminate, politically moderate male scapegoats. On the contrary, Robert's text problematizes the identity of the heroine, placing her in an uneasy, unstable position between the masculine and the feminine poles: the boundary line dividing the two polarized spaces cuts through her, symbolized by the central image of the incurable, scar in the womb. Ultimately, then, a less patent, but not a less significant site of difference is the one of the text's political stakes. The Futurist heroine is not proposed as a model of emancipation to other women in the way that the Futurist hero is: in fact, her exceptionality results in feelings of supercilious detachment versus other members of her sex. The area of experiences and aspirations shared with the other female characters is limited to the physical and sexual sphere: gossip about sexual experiences, competitive desire of attracting the other sex, and vulnerability to the disease potentially hidden in their womb. In the spiritual sphere of ambitious, artistic, aggressive aspirations, the protagonist relates only to the Futurist writer Marinetti, who demiurgically shapes her entrance into the literary world, and to whom she displays a hero-worshipping attitude.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, the novel offers a story of inner conflicts and malaise which we cannot find in the male Futurists' texts: the experience of a woman overstepping the boundaries of her preordained role and entering the sphere of culture and self-affirmation. However, the rebellion is channeled out of the social and political ground into the turbulent stream of avant-garde artistic experience. The "cure" proposed by this text (unleashed creative imagination, *paroliberismo*), allegorizes the limits of the strategy generally adopted by the Futurist women: to follow an avant-garde practice prescribed by a male-centered movement which does not seriously threaten the social organization of gender.

An analysis of writing by and about women in Futurism can actually expose ideological underpinnings of the Futurist aesthetic revolution. Marinetti's manifesto on "words in freedom" loudly proclaims a will to clear the linguistic ground and to open an infinite space for the "multiplied" individual by destroying the barriers of traditional syntax and the old tyrannic idol—the literary "I." However, this move

turns out to be only apparently iconoclastic: in fact, paradoxically, the Futurist "dynamic," "liberated" text predicates a new tyrannic (masculine) subject, erects a new monolithic idol with a monopoly in value univocally defined in a closed-in ideological space.

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## Notes

1. "a male club with a puerile and indeed sinister insistence on aggressive virility" (Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1977), p. 157.)

2. "L'attribuire dei doveri alla donna equivale a farle perdere tutta la sua potenza feconda. I ragionamenti e le deduzioni del Femminismo non distruggeranno la sua fatalità primordiale; non possono far altro che falsarla e costringerla a manifestarsi attraverso deviazioni che conducono ai peggiori errori." (Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto della Donna futurista*, in Claudia Salaris, *Le futuriste* (Milano: edizioni delle donne, 1982), p. 34.)

3. "la donna è ugualmente il grande principio galvanizzante al quale tutto è offerto" (Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto futurista della lussuria*, in Salaris, p. 38.)

4. "DONNE, RIDIVENTATE SUBLIMEMENTE INGIUSTE, COME TUTTE LE FORZE DELLA NATURA!" (Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto della Donna futurista*, in Salaris, p. 34.)

5. It should be noticed that this programme of female emancipation was substantially in line with Marinetti's demands for women rights like equal pay, sexual freedom, easy divorce and release from the "legal prostitution" of marriage. However, spelling out the motives that underlined these goals, he repeatedly indicated woman as an obstacle to the realization of the Futurist ideal—the breeding of aggressive, energetic individuals released from the weakening effect of sentimental passion and of the parliamentary system: "La donna non appartiene a un uomo, ma bensì all'avvenire e allo sviluppo della razza. Noi vogliamo che una donna ami un uomo e gli si conceda per il tempo che vuole; poi, non vincolata da contratto, né da tribunali moralistici, metta alla luce una creatura che la società deve educare fisicamente e intellettualmente ad un'alta concezione di libertà italiana. Una sola educatrice basta a favorire e difendere senza costrizione il primo sviluppo di 100 bambini. (. . .) Verrà completamente abolita quella atmosfera di piagnucolamenti e di mani aggrappate alle gonne e di baciucchiamenti morbosi che costituiscono la prima fanciullezza. (. . .) I bambini

maschi devono—secondo noi—svilupparsi lontano dalle bambine perchè i loro primi giuochi siano nettamente maschili, cioè privi di ogni morbosità affettiva, d'ogni delicatezza donnesca, vivaci, battaglieri, muscolari, e violentemente dinamici. La convivenza di bambini e bambine produce sempre un ritardo nella formazione del carattere dei bambini che immancabilmente subiscono il fascino e la seduzione imperativa della piccola femmina come piccoli cicisbei o piccoli schiavi instupiditi.” (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Democrazia futurista*, in *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1968), p. 370.)

6. Valentine de Saint Point, *Manifesto della Donna futurista*, in Salaris, p. 35.

7. See Anna Nozzoli, “Le donne del posdomani” in *Tabù e coscienza* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978), cap. II: “La scarsa presenza femminile all’interno del gruppo futurista, l’esiguità anche numerica dei risultati prodotti, sono infatti altrettante ragioni che limitano l’opera della Ginanni, della Rosa, di Benedetta, nei confini angusti della ‘curiosità letteraria.’” (p. 41); “le aspettative di quanti sperassero in singolari casi di femminismo letterario all’interno della misoginia futurista, risultano inevitabilmente deluse, e forse non poteva essere altrimenti, data la prepotente ambiguità delle posizioni marinettiane, il consenso incondizionato che esse esercitarono su quasi tutte le scrittrici.” (p. 43).

8. Enif Robert and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Un ventre di donna* (Milano: Facchi, 1919). In the title page, Marinetti’s name precedes the one of “Signora ENIF ROBERT” conferring to the authoress a subordinated role. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Marinetti’s seal of approval follows Robert’s signature at the end of her preface in the following fashion:

“Approvo incondizionatamente.

F. T. Marinetti

futurista”

9. Cfr. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), passim.

10. The page numbers indicated in parentheses refer to the quoted edition.

11. “Non sono pazza. Ho i nervi di una donna non comune, nervi che pensano, vogliono, si avviticchiano e si staccano, si arrampicano sull’impossibile, e che l’amore non può soddisfare.” (p. 7).

12. “In realtà, lo adoro. Ma il mio spirito scontento, ironico, scatta via, mentre egli mi bacia con tenerezza, e si slancia altrove, cercando, frugando, lontano, vicino, nel passato, nel futuro, in fondo a me stessa, un’altra realtà, un’altra gioia, un capriccio senza forma, un altro uomo, senza corpo e senza voce, un tipo astratto . . . una pazzia, insomma.” (p. 4).

13. “Soffocata, annientata, stupitissima, lo subii. Fortis si staccò da me ed uscì sul balcone. Io non seppi né gridare, né ribellarmi. Feroce contro me stessa, contenta e scontenta insieme, mi alzai e andai a coricarmi, in camera mia. Giulio mi trovò a letto, irritatissima, colla febbre,” (p. 13).

14. “I futuristi che aprono *simbolicamente* i cranii duri, per saettarvi la scintilla del

genio dinamico, creatore di ardimenti vertiginosi, sono meno matti di voi, freddi squartatori di ventri bianchi, che troppe volte *studiate* sulla viva carne palpitante!" (p. 142).

15. "Il suo ventre isterico, dagli scomposti sussulti, dritto, piatto, oscuro, ruvido, è difeso da una finta corazza romantica. Sulle accese fioriture del sesso, ella scarabocchia platoniche offerte di sensualità spirituale. e trova chi ci crede!" (p. 202).

16. "Un palpitare gioioso di bianchezze plastiche; fremiti di salute e di godimento nella ricchezza dei riflessi biondi e ricciuti" (p. 203).

17. "Ecco una matrona che raccoglie penosamente in un corset-corazza le placide onde rilassate e pesanti di un ventre stanco. Spoglio anche questa. . . Ampiezza di superficie bruna. Pelle distesa, con macchie più scure; sembra la buccia screpolata di un frutto che abbia contenuto troppa polpa," (p. 204).

18. "E perché tutte le altre donne, quelle che io vedo passare snelle nel solco scintillante dell'ammirazione maschile, perché, loro, *stanno bene*, e io no?" (p. 203).

19. This definition appears to echo Richard von Krafft-Ebing's famous construct of lesbians as being endowed of a male soul in a female body. See George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), p. 39.

20. I am using the term "object" in the sense defined by Julia Kristeva, particularly in *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), where the phenomenon of the repudiation of femininity, anti-semitism, rituals of defilement and phobias are traced back to the fundamental psychic process of the subject's accession to meaning and identity: "The object confronts us (. . .) with our earlier attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling." (p. 13). This primal process of repression, separation and rejection results in "an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection." (p. 11). The Ego, its objects and representations "arrive only *a posteriori* on an enigmatic foundation that has been already marked off; its return, in a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise, or more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of *abjection* notifies us of the limits of the human universe." (p. 11). The concept of modern literature: "contemporary literature (. . .) when it is written as the language, possible at last, of that impossible constituted either by a-subjectivity or by non-objectivity, propounds, as a matter of fact, a sublimation of abjection. Thus it becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity." (p. 26).

21. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 262.

22. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, p. 261.

23. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, pp. 264-265.

24. Paul Julius Moebius, *L'inferiorità mentale della donna* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978). The quotes refer to this edition (abbreviated in the text as IM). The pamphlet was first published in Germany in 1900; it was translated into Italian in 1904.

25. "Mi avvento con tutto il cuore verso di lui, il mio tesoro lontano, che ora riderà coi cuginetti, senza l'ombra di un pensiero triste. Domani, potrebbe essere orfano. . . . Crescere senza la sua mamma. . . ." p. 54.

26. See note 12.

27. Mosse (ch. 3, "The Rediscovery of the Human Body") observes that the exposure of human bodies to the healing power of the sun is a fundamental aspect of a *fin-de-siècle* movement of rebellion against bourgeois respectability. In the German volkish right, and particularly in the so-called "life-reform" movement, nudism and the celebration of the sun were associated with the mystique of national and racial regeneration, so that the rediscovery of the human body was ultimately stripped of its menace to the establishment (nationalism, respectability). One might argue that Futurism made an analogous move in integrating revolutionary stances and new myths into the ideology of national regeneration.

28. This excerpt and the following one are part of a dialogue between the sun and the womb imagined by the patient. The fourth passage represents the protagonist's perceptions as she watches the scene of a dolphin dying on the shore.

29. From one of Marinetti's letters to the protagonist.

30. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, p. 226.

31. The idea that friendships among women are not to be taken seriously is a long-standing one: in the eighteenth century, "the new and popular science of phrenology reflected general opinion when it sought proof through the study of the brain that women made friends only among men and never with other "women." (Mosse, p. 68).

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## The Role of the Woman in the *Orlando Innamorato*

The two types of the woman characters one can generally find within the confines of the chivalric novel are the "damsel in distress," that virginal maiden in need of the knight's prowess to save her from a fate worse than death, and the enchantress, a Circe-like character who seduces the knight and keeps him subject indefinitely her through magic powers. Although Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* contains its share of these familiar female fictions, its treatment of women is certainly unique and shows a notable departure from the treatment of women and their roles in earlier chivalric novels.<sup>1</sup>

Even if we find that Angelica plays at times both the damsel in distress and the enchantress, she is far from being limited to these roles. While Orlando pursues Angelica, she in turn pursues Rinaldo. While Orlando saves Angelica through his prowess, *she* saves the object of her desire from death through her cleverness.<sup>2</sup> And just as Orlando's love for her remains unreciprocated, her love for Rinaldo is met with the latter's disdain. This double role of Angelica—pursuing lover and pursued beloved—dissolves the idea of any sexual hierarchy of desire.

Yet Boiardo has a different idea of the positive role of woman in his poem, shown through his depiction of the other two female protagonists, Fiordelisa and Brandamante. The first of the two is the lover of Brandimarte. In a text which pokes fun at the courtly love tradition, it is noteworthy that descriptions of their relation are free of such courtly love clichés as the vassal/suzerain hierarchy. Fiordelisa, neither angel nor demon, is presented as Brandimarte's partner on equal terms. Their relation gives value to—but at the same time goes beyond—pure erotic

instincts. Franceschetti notes Fiordelisa's integrity: "Non la vediamo mai in fatti ingannare o mentire o tradire altri personaggi, né far uso della sua bellezza e del suo fascino per ottenere quanto desidera" (206).<sup>3</sup>

Fiordelisa and Brandimarte eventually marry, and soon afterward they resume their life of adventure, together undertaking the extremely important mission of freeing Orlando from the Fonte del Riso. In the course of chivalric literature, this joint act amounts to a fundamental innovation, and to understand it we should put the situation in historical perspective. Boiardo's source of inspiration for many episodes, Chrétien de Troyes, has been considered by some critics to be a vindicator of marital love. Yet Chrétien's positive view of marriage and of woman's role in chivalry has very narrow limits. For instance, in *Erec et Enide*, and again in *Yvain*, he presents a conflict between the marital relation and the chivalric ideal, exploring the laziness that can befall a knight if he settles down to enjoy marital bliss. If he no longer exercises his profession, the knight goes against his very reason for existence. As this new disposition upsets the fabric of the courtly society, in both novels the knight is forced back out into the world of adventure, and a makeshift equilibrium is found only much later and after many hardships. To my knowledge, in Italian literature of subsequent periods until the time of Boiardo, the relation between marriage and chivalry received no further elaboration. In this episode of the *Innamorato* Boiardo picks up the thread of Chrétien's problematic presentation of marriage and in particular of the woman's role in a chivalric world. Boiardo's answer is unequivocal: he counters Chrétien by presenting a wife who is not only *not* a hindrance to the carrying out of the knight's chivalric duties, but who is an active and necessary partner in carrying out worthy deeds.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Boiardo's panegyric on friendship dedicated to Brandimarte occurs immediately after that character's marriage to Fiordelisa, for it indicates that marriage is not an obstacle to friendship. Although married to Fiordelisa, Brandimarte is nevertheless "in gran pensiero" over his friend's well-being and so it is that he—not alone but together with Fiordelisa—travels to a distant land to rescue Orlando from the spell of the Fonte del Riso.



Instead of an impediment, as Chrétien feared the knight's wife would be in such adventures, Fiordelisa is virtually the leader.<sup>4</sup> It is she who advised Brandimarte, as well as Rugiero and Gradasso, who in the meantime have joined them in their search. While Brandimarte is assailed by various spells on his way to the fountain, it is always Fiordelisa who guides him:

[Brandimarte] da diversi incanti  
 Era assalito, et esso alcun non piglia,  
 Ché Fiordelisa sempre lo consiglia. (3.7.30)

Upon reaching the fountain itself, Brandimarte falls victim to the spell and forgets his friend, his wife, and even his own existence. Yet Fiordelisa, by furnishing Brandimarte with four crowns which have the power to break spells, frees not only her husband, but also Orlando, Gradasso and Rugiero (the latter two also having recently fallen under the spell). Having thus regained their reasoning faculties, the four knights exit from the enchanted fountain as if awakening from a dream. The crowns in Fiordelisa's power are a symbol of the control of reason and will over concupiscence. If we recall Dante's *Purgatory*, we see that it is just before taking leave of Dante that Vergil crowns the pilgrim master of himself: "io te sovra te corono e mitrio" (XXVII,142). Through this ritualistic act, Vergil proclaims the victory of the intellectual faculties over the sensory faculties in the pilgrim Dante.<sup>5</sup> That Boiardo had the same symbolism—and, as I believe, the same scene—in mind is suggested by Fiordelisa's words of encouragement: "Vince ogni cosa la animositate, / Ma condurla con *senno* è di mestiero" (3.7.16). This call for "senno," or reasoned judgment, by Fiordelisa is actually an echo of Vergil's final words to the pilgrim:

Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno:  
 libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,  
 e fallo fora non fare a suo *senno*:  
 per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio." (XXVII, 139-142)

Yet Fiordelisa goes beyond the role of Vergil: rather than merely recognizing the dominance of reason in the knights, she *imparts* that dominance to them. Her power is therefore all the more worthy of note,

for without it the knights would be forever entrapped in the illusion of the fountain's spell.

Moreover, the setting for the *Innamorato* episode recalls the Garden of Eden of Dante's *Purgatory* scene, which in turn brings us to consider the original Genesis story. In Eden's terrestrial paradise the faculties of the soul were originally in order, the higher over the lower, as in reason over sense, but were lost, as Genesis 3 tells us, due to the woman's eating of the fatal apple and offering it to the man. The return to the Garden of Eden in Dante's *Purgatory* implies a return to this pristine order for the individual Dante. In the *Innamorato*, the Fonte del Riso is a place where the hierarchy of reason over the senses is continuously overturned, and as such is a perpetual reenactment of the Fall.<sup>6</sup> Yet in this simulacrum of Eden it is due precisely to a woman that the garden can become once again the place where the higher faculties dominate the lower. By identifying Fiordelisa with the part of liberating reason and by relating the scene to the Garden of Eden via Dante's *Purgatory*, Boiardo has reversed the Genesis story and boldly countered Chrétien's fear that women are inimical to chivalry.

The other female protagonist and the soon to be co-founder of the Estense dynasty, Bradamante, is the model of valor and *cortesía*. Completely dedicated to the well-being of her king and Christian people, she incorporates all the qualities of the ideal Christian knight. She is referred to by the author as "la dama di valore" (3.5.5), while Charlemagne considers her just as essential as her brother Ranaldo to the safety of Christendom (2.6.23). The king is certainly justified in putting so much faith in Bradamante, for when his troops are attacked by Rodamonte, it is she who leads them against the ferocious pagan: "Costei mena la schiera gran flagella" (2.6.57).

She neither disdains eros, nor perceives it within the courtly love tradition. The genesis of her love for Rugiero is unique. We need only recall Andreas Capellanus' assertion that the blind were incapable of love, or the provençal poets' (and their successors') endless descriptions of love entering through the eyes, in order to realize the importance attributed to sight in the origin of love.<sup>7</sup> Bradamante, on the contrary, becomes enamored before seeing Rugiero's face, her sentiments based solely on his courteous nature and benevolent actions.

When Rugiero and Bradamante are attacked by evildoers, Boiardo has occasion to tell us that Rugiero fights spurred on by reason and love working together: "Ragione, animo ardito e insieme amore / L'un più che l'altro dentro lo martella" (3.5.56). Here again, as in the above case yet contrary to most depictions of love in chivalric (and other) literature, we are witness to the collaboration of love and reason.

Bradamante and Rugiero are destined to marry and found the Estense family. Yet before their relationship has the chance to progress any further, they lose sight of each other in their pursuit of their would-be attackers. This temporary separation allows Bradamante to meet the hermit who discloses that Rugiero:

. . .morirà dannato,  
Se Dio per sua pietate non lo aiuta,  
O se persona non li mette in core  
Di batezarse e uscir di tanto errore. (3.8.58)

The fact that the hermit reveals this to Bradamante in particular suggests her intended role in the coming chapters. Is Bradamante destined by Boiardo to be the instrument of her beloved's conversion in the same way that Rugiero's father brought about the conversion of his beloved to Christianity? With the fondness Boiardo has shown for symmetrical conversions in the poem, this eventuality seems highly probable.<sup>8</sup>

In her relation with her beloved, while Fiordelisa saves Brandimarte from indefinite unconsciousness through the exercise of reason, Bradamante intends to save Rugiero from eternal damnation through converting him to Christianity. Thus while Fiordelisa led Brandimarte to embrace reason, Bradamante was meant to lead Rugiero to embrace faith, faith and reason constituting for Boiardo the highest values of humankind. Even if the narrator is a masculine voice and the woman is viewed from the male perspective, it is nevertheless clear that the *Innamorato*, for the first time in chivalric literature, gives to woman a significant, active, and positive role in the development of the narrative.

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## Notes:

1. Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato*, ed. Aldo Scaglione (Torino: Unione Tipografico-editrice Torinese, 1963).
2. As Rinaldo is about to die at the hands of the monster of Rocca Crudele, Angelica renders the monster harmless by throwing it waxed bread (I.9).
3. Antonio Franceschetti, *L'Orlando Innamorato e le sue componenti tematiche e strutturali* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1975).
4. Chrétien's Enide, also, once she is forced into accompanying her husband in his pursuit of adventure, is helpful in saving his life on a number of occasions. She is, however, in no way a leader or even a partner in the knight's adventures.
5. In *Dante Studies II* (Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge, 1967), Charles S. Singleton treats this act of crowning as the culmination in the process of justification (59).
6. For the Garden of Eden's relation to the false, enchanted gardens of Renaissance literature, see A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966).
7. Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry, ed. Austin P. Evans (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941).
8. In *Reali di Francia*, Rugiero's mother was, like his future bride, a warrior.

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## Dal giardino dei bei fiori

In a letter written in 1443 by Gregorio Correr, Venetian patrician, humanist and theologian, to Cecelia Gonzaga, daughter of the Duke of Mantua, he advised the young girl toward a life of chastity, saying,

O excellent gift of God! O virginity akin to the angels and consecrated in the Virgin Mother and in the Virgin's Son. You are the road to heaven, the enemy of demons, the ornament of the soul. . . . If you are a bride of Christ, 'forget thy people and thy father's house'. . . . Flee, Cecelia, virgin of Christ, flee, cover your eyes, cover your ears. Flee, if you can, . . . 'For the flesh lusts against the spirit' . . .<sup>1</sup>

Willingly she did flee, entering a convent in 1444.

Indeed, during the Renaissance, the possession of chastity and virginity were a young girl's most valued possessions. The Church preached its dictum of purity for young women as the highest aspiration for those of the fairer sex. And yet, as Boccaccio explained in his biography of Sabina Poppaea, one of 104 alleged biographies of women in *De claris mulieribus*, purity and modesty were difficult to maintain. Of Sabina he wrote, "It was her custom to show modesty assiduously in public, while in private she practiced lasciviousness, the universal vice of women."<sup>2</sup> Further, he writes, "excessive softness, the flattery, wantonness, and tears . . . are a woman's certain and deadly poison for the souls of men who trust them."<sup>3</sup> Women, against their true wanton nature, then, were to emulate the example set by the Virgin Mary and to be obedient, chaste and modest.

But from the setting which produced these moralistic paradigms for women also came a large group of surprising images of women. These

pictures all have certain characteristics in common. They are intimate, half-length portraits of females with their light-colored hair worn loose and flowing, with their white underblouse or *camicia* open, revealing an expanse of very white skin and either both breasts, one breast, or sometimes just deep cleavage. Their clothes are in a state of *déshabillé*, and they are glancing either boldly out at the viewer or else looking modestly down. They sometimes hold draperies to their chest in a futile attempt at modesty. In a few of the pictures, the girls are shown holding flowers in one hand—or are shown with flowers in their hair. These pictures have come to be called depictions of the goddess Flora, whom the Sabines recognized as the divinity of flowers and springtime. It is with these so-called depictions of Flora, along with the group of which I will argue they are a part, that I will be concerned in this article.

Focusing on Titian's *Flora* (ca. 1515) and Palma Vecchio's *La Flora*, painted around the same time, I will ask why some of these depictions of young women in various stages of *déshabillé* were given the name of *Flora*, and whether these "Fiori" were different from the rest of these pictures. I will also ask, given the moralistic tenor of the times and its concern with chastity and virginity, who would have commissioned such pictures and why.

I will argue that the paintings identified as Flora were part of a group of pictures of girls done in Venice in the first half of the cinquecento and that this identification may or may not have been given to the painting by the artist, the possibility existing that it was a later, or secondary title affixed to the picture. I will also argue that these young women can be recognized by their hair and clothing as ladies of dubious reputation, the courtesans or prostitutes of cinquecento Venice, echoing Boccaccio's story of Flora, from Lactantius, as a Roman courtesan posing as the goddess of flowers. I will further suggest that these women had a desire to represent themselves as goddesses, or as larger-than-life images of female beauty, and that they willingly posed for these idealized portraits of themselves to further their reputations as symbols of sensual love.

Nothing that these pictures show girls in an intimate state of *déshabillé* for the times, and that they were often copied and distributed, I will conclude that these paintings were commissioned and sold as erotically-appealing boudoir pictures of idealized, beautiful

young women to be hung and displayed for the personal delectation of their male audience. The name of Flora affixed to some of them may have arisen from their pose holding a flower, or their pose with one breast uncovered, recalling Alcamenes' *Venus Genetrix*, which was almost the symbol for a goddess in Renaissance painting.

Both Titian's *Flora*, painted around 1515 (Fig. 1) and Palma Vecchio's *La Flora*, dated approximately the same time (Fig. 2), are generally thought to have been inspired by earlier paintings of Flora done by Leonardo da Vinci and artists working with him.<sup>4</sup> While the Floras from Leonardo's school are still timeless in their depictions, the Venetian Floras, by their clothing and hairstyles, seem to belong more directly to a group of female half-length figures popular at the same time, in the early cinquecento. These pictures, of which there are many, show young beautiful girls with their hair down and with their clothing loosened in sensual disarray, usually with their breasts partially exposed. The images are overtly sensual and while partaking vaguely of classical allusions, have an air of contemporary nonchalance, some more so than others.

The flower held occasionally by one of these young women, as in the cases of Titian's *Flora* and Palma Vecchio's *La Flora*, is not the focus of the picture and in fact, most of the young ladies are not holding flowers at all, but instead are clutching a drapery, sitting with arms folded, pressing their hand to their bosom, holding a perfume bottle, or casually leaning on a chair. If the title of Flora had not been attached to the few pictured holding flowers, they would easily blend into this larger group of paintings of young girls.

Indeed, it is not clear that the name "Flora" was given to these pictures by the artists who painted them, for the provenance of both of the paintings here being considered is very sketchy. In fact, we have no contemporary reference to Titian's *Flora* at all, and therefore cannot establish for certain that Titian himself called it *Flora*.<sup>5</sup> Palma Vecchio's *La Flora* was only first attributed to him by Berenson in 1894. Its traditional title of *La Flora* had been kept because of its resemblance in pose and attitude to Titian's *Flora*, leading some historians to speculate that Palma Vecchio had seen Titian's painting in Venice and drew inspiration from it.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the case may have been, here, as in the

Titian painting, there are no contemporary referents to the painting. Indeed, of this larger group of "female half-length figures," as Held called them in his article on Flora, most of them carry the title of "Portrait of a Young Lady," with an occasional variation.<sup>7</sup>

We do know that many portraits of ladies, of which I am arguing that these "Fiori" are a part, were painted and sought after. Charles Hope has said in his book on Titian that there was a distinct, local tradition in Venice of painting pretty girls in a portrait format "either clothed or partially nude," and that these girls were either the man's mistress, or, further removed, simply pretty pin-ups.<sup>8</sup> Ridolfi referred to a poem by Bernardo Tasso "invitando Titiano, a far l'effigie d'una sua Favorita."<sup>9</sup> Vasari wrote that "for the Florentine, [not otherwise identified] . . . Titian painted a very beautiful portrait of a lady whom that nobleman loved when he was in Venice," who, in return, "honoured Titian with a superb sonnet. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the personal identity of the girls in the portraits may have been we can tell something about them by the manner in which they are portrayed. First of all, they are shown with their hair loose and flowing, denoting abandon and vanity. The patron saint of prostitutes, Mary Magdalene, is usually depicted with long, sensuous hair.<sup>11</sup> Also, as Emma Mellencamp said in her article in 1969, the long golden hair is an antique referent echoing the nymphs of classical antiquity. These girls are also shown in their *camicia*, a blouse-like undergarment, in which, as Mellencamp also stated, ladies of the sixteenth century never appeared in public, especially not with their breasts exposed.<sup>12</sup> She was writing to refute earlier speculation by Jacob Burckhardt that these pictures of young girls were made as wedding pictures and that these were, in fact, Renaissance brides.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, as we look at the variations among this genre, seeing Titian's *Flora* and Palma Vecchio's *La Flora* as a part, these girls do not look like brides. In an age when the virginity and chastity of a wife were of paramount concern, a depiction such as this would be very unlikely. From the moralists and Church fathers of the day came the same message: all that mattered for a girl was to keep her virginity. Saint Ambrose, writing in the fourth century, was one of the first Church fathers to extol virginity as a virtue. A letter written by Michelangelo to his





FIG. 1. Titian, *Flora*, Florence, Uffizi

nephew Lionardo in 1549 echoed the same concern. He wrote, in part: "If you wish to take a wife . . . I can at least tell you not to go after money, but only after goodness and a good reputation. . . ." <sup>14</sup> In fact, Pietro Aretino, writing five years later, opined, "It would be well if women died when they were still young, for there is no doubt that they are good and innocent when they are tender babes." <sup>15</sup>

If, in fact, these women pictured were not then "Renaissance brides," who were they, why were they sometimes pictured as Flora, and why were their breasts exposed? A few speculations can be forwarded: that these pictures were of the mistresses of the painters (as later generations sometimes called them, for example, "Titian's Mistress as Flora"), or that they were pictures of prostitutes or courtesans who posed for the pictures to further their own purposes, and to add charm to the walls of male patrons.

Certainly, in the case of Titian, we know of his social dalliance, in spite of his marriage, with at least one famous, or perhaps infamous Venetian courtesan, La Zaffetta. Titian formed part of the group called "The Triumvirate" by many historians (including Crowe and Cavalcaselle), his "compeers" Pietro Aretino and Jacopo Sansovino rounding it out. That they led a life composed of "quiet dissipation attendant on mirthful company and fine suppers," meeting "either in Titian's rooms at Biri, or in Aretino's palace on the Grand Canal," has also been noted by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, and they often had company. <sup>16</sup> In a letter to Titian in December 1547, Aretino wrote, "a pair of pheasants and I don't know what other delicacies will be waiting for you if you dine with Angela Zaffetta and myself." <sup>17</sup> In another letter of Aretino's, he described the interior of a rich man's house, noting all the exotic pets from dogs to birds and monkeys, and finally spoke of the books, paintings and opulent kitchen. He then wrote, "Nor do I mention the nymphs, who with their presence surpass all the marvels I have described." <sup>18</sup>

Lest we dismiss Aretino as an isolated case, let us look at Titian himself. Hope cited a letter from Tebaldi to Alfonso d'Este. The Duke had wanted Titian to accompany him to Rome, and Titian had begged off, saying that he was ill. The Duke's ambassador wrote to Alfonso saying:

I have been to see Titian, who has no fever at all: he looks well, if somewhat exhausted; and I suspect that the girls whom he often paints in

different poses arouse his desires, which he then satisfies more than his limited strength permits; but he denies it. . . .<sup>19</sup>

We can question the veracity of this story about Titian's relationship to his models, but even thirty years later, Aretino, in a letter to Sansovino, writes:

What makes me really marvel at him is that, whenever fair ladies he sees, and no matter where he is, he fondles them, makes a to-do of kissing them, and entertains them with a thousand juvenile pranks, but goes no further.<sup>20</sup>

He was, after all, at least sixty-five years old at this time.

Georgina Masson, in her book on courtesans, related that a prostitute named Honorada had a poem written to Titian, saying of her, "no doubt Honorada hoped that he might thus be inspired to paint a picture of her, as he did of so many courtesans."<sup>21</sup> While we have no direct evidence that these pictures we have been considering were actually paintings of prostitutes or courtesans (any such identification having been given at a later date), we do know something about the women who were courtesans.

These girls began their careers at the age of about fourteen, usually through the assistance of their mothers, and were "set up" by a wealthy suitor.<sup>22</sup> That many of these young prostitutes cultivated literary men to guard against being badly written about has been noted by Masson. Indeed one such courtesan, Tullia d'Aragona, had alienated Aretino and either he or Lorenzo Veniero, who worked as his secretary, penned *La Tariffa della Puttane di Venetia* in 1535, in which poor Tullia was described as "the most abject of whores."<sup>23</sup> A kindlier gentleman then reportedly rescued her status by casting Tullia as his main character in his *Dialogo dell'Amore*, which came out in 1536-37.<sup>24</sup> Angela Zaffetta, who we have already seen dining with Aretino, Titian and Sansovino, was herself the object of a pair of indecent poems, *La Puttana Errante* and *Il Trentuno*, which referred to a lady's punishment at the hands of her clients if she was unruly.<sup>25</sup> The lady was "sequestered" and raped by thirty-one men, or in some extreme cases, was subjected to a "*trentuno reale*" which involved seventy-nine men. Supposedly, La Zaffetta had survived a *trentuno reale* herself.<sup>26</sup> It was definitely in a courtesan's best interests to be on good terms with the men who knew her, and to be portrayed in the best light possible.



FIG. 2. Palma Vecchio, *La Flora*, London, National Gallery

What distinguished a courtesan from a prostitute was, quite simply, the amount of money she made from being talented, beautiful and clever with music and poetry, and not necessarily in that order. The very successful ones attained the status of courtesan, and there was even a hierarchy within that. But the question still remains, were these the young women depicted in the paintings of Flora, and in the larger group of pictures of which I am suggesting that Floras were a part?

The special look of a courtesan was widely known, and it strikingly resembles the girls in these half-length pictures. The ideal of beauty for these women was lyricized in poetry. In *Il Vanto della Cortigiana Ferrarese* by Giambattista Verini, cited by Georgina Masson, an ideal courtesan is described as having coral lips, an alabaster neck, golden hair, firm young breasts, white hands, small feet and a "plump soft body made for pleasure." She should also be very young, fourteen to sixteen years of age.<sup>27</sup> Any deficit in these attributes could be made up for by employing the services of a *ruffiana*, a female servant sought after by the more successful and calculating of these young ladies, who was a sort of beauty specialist, knew hairstyling and fashion, and could camouflage defects and advancing age.<sup>28</sup> That the use of cosmetics and a rage for blonde, or "titian-colored" hair was wide-spread among a certain group of women is evident from the sermons of San Bernardino da Siena, among others, who spent most of his life travelling between the Italian city-states preaching. He railed out against excessive fashions, cosmetics, high heels, and bleaching one's hair in the sun, or in other words, "repudiating God's intention, by altering your looks."<sup>29</sup> San Bernardino's sermons were well-attended, and that courtesans and prostitutes regularly went to church was noted by Masson, who wrote that many attended services accompanied by an entourage of servants to show themselves off.<sup>30</sup>

That these young professional girls would also want to show themselves off in a portrait of idealized beauty, or even as a goddess, is also a possibility. Certainly the height of their shoes, called *chopines*, elevated them to new heights, sometimes as much as eighteen inches.<sup>31</sup> The spectacle of these rouged, gowned and bedecked young beauties, raised to icon size in the streets and *palazzi* of Venice, must have been impressive. The word "goddess" in everyday parlance, to denote the

lady of your affections, was also almost as commonplace, especially if she were a professional beauty. In a letter to one "La Basciadonna," dated April 1548, Aretino wrote, "My lady Marina, . . . There is no need to tell you that you are a goddess, but rather to adore you as one." Another letter, written to a male friend: "But now let us talk about my goddesses. Their favors, you say, have taken me captive."<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, it seems as though Aretino's goddesses may partake rather specifically of the goddess Flora's attributes. In Palma Vecchio's *La Flora*, the goddess holds out a handful of primroses to the viewer. Primroses, called *primule* in Italian, are one of the first flowers to bloom in the spring. According to Bauhinus, the primrose was also called "St. Peter's Key" or "Key to Heaven" in *De Plantis*.<sup>33</sup> Titian's *Flora* offers her viewer a handful of pink and white roses, which in the Renaissance were symbolic of pride and triumphant love.<sup>34</sup> As Levi d'Ancona wrote on the iconography of flowers in the Renaissance, "when an artist uses exclusively one plant and places it prominently in a work of art, then it is likely that this motif may have been selected for its symbolic connotation."<sup>35</sup> Certainly, these two readings, the primrose as the key to heaven, and the rose as pride and triumphant love, would not be inconsistent with the character of Flora.

Flora, the Sabine divinity of flowers, springtime and love, was first identified with the Greek nymph Chloris by Ovid (*Fasti*, V, 183ff.)<sup>36</sup> As Julius Held noted in his article on Flora, she was taken up by the Romans as the goddess of springtime and has closely been associated with Venus, goddess of love and desire.<sup>37</sup> But in another reading of Flora, as Held further noted, Boccaccio had later identified her, in his *De claris mulieribus*, as a Roman courtesan who tricked the Senate into holding games in her honor by lavishly sponsoring them with her ill-gotten gains. This more earthly reading of Flora, emphasizing her immorality as opposed to her sensual qualities, was based not on Ovid, but on the writing of Lactantius and others who attacked the pagan tradition from whence she had sprung, and these works were well-known in the Renaissance.<sup>38</sup>

The quattrocento poet Politian, part of Lorenzo de' Medici's circle in Florence, and also Lorenzo himself, wrote *rime* celebrating the erotic nature of the goddess and her relationship to Zephyrus, god of the west wind (Politian, *Stanze* I, 68; and Lorenzo de' Medici, "Selve d'Amore").<sup>39</sup> Zephyrus, in E. Wind's reading, had possessed Flora when

she was still the virginal nymph Chloris, transforming her into Flora and claiming her as his wife.<sup>40</sup> Into the cinquecento, Natalis Comes, in his *Mythologiae* (1851), called Zephyrus the messenger of Venus, writing that “omnia verno aeris tepore ad procreationem excitantur,” associating the warm wind of Zephyrus with love-making.<sup>41</sup>

A courtesan of this time, especially in Venice, could well see herself as embodying the dual characteristics of this goddess/prostitute associated with love and flowers. Even if these depictions of Flora were not illustrative of any specific text in this regard, that this traditional reading of Flora was known is evident. The idea that during the Renaissance, the portrayal of a woman with one breast exposed (in the manner of Alcamenes' *Venus Genetrix*), became a symbol for a goddess of classical antiquity, was put forth by Wethey in his work on Titian.<sup>42</sup> But whether one can read all of these pictures as portrayals of goddesses, the ones holding flowers specifically as the goddess Flora, is problematical. However, as E. Wind has written, even if one cannot directly establish a link between a literary reading and a picture, one *can* connect a taste and mood and a “community of literary interests” in a specific time and place. All things antique were especially in vogue during this time in the Renaissance.<sup>43</sup> The houses of courtesans were decorated with mythological subjects and could even be sumptuous, according to Bandello's *Novelle*:

In the boudoir, where she retired when she [Imperia, a Roman courtesan] was going to receive some great personage, the walls were covered with hangings of cloth of gold, embroidered all over and falling in rich folds. Above the hangings there was a cornice decorated with gold and ultramarine. On the cornice stood beautiful vases of various precious substances—alabaster, porphyry, serpentine . . . Ranging round the room were many chests and coffer, richly carved and inlaid, and all of great value.<sup>44</sup>

No mention is made of any paintings in this extravagant setting, but that there could have been a picture portraying the mistress of the house *all' antica* is not inconceivable.

Whether or not these women did, in fact, commission pictures of themselves (as an illustration in David Kunzle's book *The History of the Comic Strip* suggested, showing a courtesan sitting for a portrait of herself as the goddess Minerva or an Amazon, which looks nothing like her), other people, mostly upper-class males did commission such

pictures.<sup>45</sup> From *The Anonimo* come notes made on the artwork in the home of Messer Andrea di Odoni of Venice. The description, taken down in 1532, says, in part:

In the court downstairs. The colossal marble head of Hercules. . . . The marble figure of a woman entirely draped, headless and handleless, in antique. . . . The many other marble heads and figures . . . are antique.<sup>46</sup>

That the taste was for things of classical antiquity, at least in one's courtyard, is here evident. But, "In the room upstairs," the notes continue, "the oil picture with the two half-length figures of a girl and an old woman behind her [*a ruffiana*?] is by Jacopo Palma." This tantalizing fragment of information, that a painting by Palma Vecchio is hanging in an upstairs room, is embellished by the rest of the passage which describes the room as a bedroom, concluding with "the large figure of a woman, nude, lying down, painted on the back of the bed, is by Gerolamo Savoldo of Brescia."<sup>47</sup> Certainly, having no further description of the painting by Palma Vecchio, we cannot conclude that this boudoir picture was, in fact, one of this group we are considering, but we can speculate that this was one of the pictures which were painted for primarily private viewing, undoubtedly an intimate picture which would compliment the large nude lying down painted on the bed.

And indeed, a letter from Aretino to Federigo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, dated August 6, 1527, deals with just this subject of bedroom decoration. He writes:

I understand that the most rare Messer Jacopo Sansovino is about to embellish your bedchamber with a statue of Venus so true to life and so living that it will fill with lustful thoughts the mind of anyone who looks at it, and I have told Sebastino, that miraculous painter, that you want him to make you a painting of anything that pleases him just so long as it is not of some hypocritical religious subject.<sup>48</sup>

We know that Titian painted many allegorical pictures of aristocratic patrons during this time, and the overtly erotic quality of these pictures has been recognized by many historians, including Charles Hope and David Rosand.<sup>49</sup> That these clients would also appreciate and commission images of young "goddesses" in the same sensual style would not be unlikely.

We do have a record of one such commission. Crowe and Cavalcaselle note that Don Diego de Mendoza, Spanish ambassador to Venice, had



had Titian do a picture of "the lady of his devotion" and that Aretino had also written these lines for her:

Furtivamente Titiano et amore  
 Presi a gara i pennelli, e le quadrella  
 Duo essempli han' fatto d'una Donna bella  
 E sacrati al Mendoza aureo Signore  
 Ond' egli altier di sì divin favore  
 Per seguir' cotal Dea, come sua Stella;  
 Con cerimonie appartenenti a quella  
 L'une in camera tien, l'altro nel core.<sup>50</sup>

With one image in his heart and the other on the wall of his chambers, the Spanish ambassador could remember his "donna bella" in his repose.

Whether these images were actual portraits of specific beauties or rather idealized composites of the contemporary standards of beauty we cannot know for sure. Some idealization, especially in the depiction of a goddess of love or a goddess of flowers would be likely, but a quick glance at the many half-length views of these women does show a certain individuality in their features which adds to their general intimacy. These idealized portraits, including Titian's *Flora* and Palma Vecchio's *La Flora* then, can be seen as a genre of pictorial images casting the young professional beauties of the day as goddesses, and some as the goddess *Flora*, *all' antica*.

In this paper I have argued that the loose hair, clothing en déshabillé, and exposed breasts of the models in these paintings denotes an erotic pose in the manner of a goddess of antiquity. I have also argued that in some cases, the title of *Flora*, carrying Boccaccio's connotation of prostitute, further defined the goddess, and that the only class of women who would have posed for such pictures were those of dubious reputation who consorted with and cultivated the company of artists and poets—namely the courtesans.

I have further argued that these pictures were commissioned by men to hang in their private chambers, that they were valued for their erotic qualities, and that the beauty of the picture could be appreciated whether or not one knew the young woman personally. I have concluded that both Titian's *Flora* and Palma Vecchio's *La Flora* are a part of this larger group of pictures, and that their titles of "Flora" are at

best secondary identifications, their first, simply, "Portrait of a Young Lady" probably being more accurate.

These images of cinquecento Venetian woman, painted by men for men, elevated the ideal of beauty to the status of goddess, put it on a pedestal for erotic delectation, and used the young women of a certain class for their own sensual pleasures.

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## Notes

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2. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women (De Claris Mulieribus)*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 215.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

4. Julius Held, "Flora, Goddess and Courtesan" In *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. M. Meiss (New York, 1961), pp. 201–18.

5. Harold Edwin Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*. (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1971), vol. I, p. 154. Held, "Flora," p. 212.

6. Giovanni Mariacher, *Palma Il Vecchio* (Milan: Bramante Editrice, 1968), p. 74.

7. The variations include, among others: "Portrait of a Lady," "Portrait of a Woman," "A Courtesan," "La Bella Gatta" (later "Violante"), "The Sibyl," and others.

8. Charles Hope, *Titian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 61.

9. Held, "Flora," p. 212.

10. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 460–61.

11. George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), reprinted in 1976, pp. 134–45.

12. Emma Mellencamp, "A Note on the Costume of Titian's *Flora*," *The Art Bulletin*, June 1969, 51:174–177.

13. Jacob Burckhardt, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. III (Basel: Benno Schwabe & Co., 1955, 5th ed.), p. 249, note 3. The German quote to which she is referring goes: "Die Brauttracht bei der Verlobung—Weiss, mit aufgelöst über die Schultern Wallendem Haare—ist die von Tizans *Flora*."

14. Robert J. Clements and Lorna Levant, ed. and trans., *Renaissance Letters, Revelations of a World Reborn* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 407.

15. Thomas Caldecot Chubb, *The Letters of Pietro Aretino* (New York: Archon Books, 1967), pp. 304–05. Chubb used the edition of Aretino's letters published by Matteo il Maestro, 1601 (Paris: Sign of the Four Elements), choosing 261 of them from the 3,000 to 4,000 available.

16. J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, *The Life and Times of Titian* (London: John Murray, 1881), 2nd edition, vol. II, p. 55.

17. Chubb, *Aretino*, p. 243.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 263–64.

19. Hope, *Titian*, pp. 57–8.

20. Chubb, *Aretino*, p. 308.

21. Georgina Masson, *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), p. 151. Ms. Masson uses many primary sources, but as she does not footnote her comments, many times the sources are impossible to discern, as in this case. She uses four different sources for Italian letter collections.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–25. Here the primary source is *Dialogo di Zoppino Fatto Frate e Ludovico Puttaniere*, either by Pietro Aretino or Francesco Delicado.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.

25. Chubb, *Aretino*, p. 361.

26. Masson, *Courtesans*, p. 147. This *trentuno reale* is supposed to have taken place on the 6th of April, 1531, when Angela was very young.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 36.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8. Source: *Dialogo di Zoppino*.

29. Iris Origo, *The World of San Bernardino* (London: The Reprint Society, Ltd., 1964), pp. 47–52, 65.

30. Masson, *Courtesans*, p. 65.

31. Jay Williams, *The World of Titian c. 1488–1576* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968), p. 106.

32. Chubb, *Aretino*, pp. 159, 262.

33. Mirella Levi-d'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1977), p. 323. Source: *De Plantis*, p. 73.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 330 ff.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

36. Joel Schmidt, *Larousse Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980), p. 106.

37. Held, "Flora," pp. 202–04 ff.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 203, note 18.

40. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, Inc., 1958, 1968 Edition), p. 115.

41. Held, "Flora," p. 204.
42. Wethey, *Titian*, vol. I, p. 26.
43. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, p. 114.
44. Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle del Bandello* (London: Presso Riccardo Bancker, 1791-93).
45. David Kunzle, *The History of the Comic Strip*, vol. I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 279.
46. Marcantonio Michiel, *The Anonimo*, trans. Paolo Mussi (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1903. Reissued 1969), p. 96.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
48. Chubb, *Aretino*, pp. 32-33.
49. Charles Hope, "Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings" in *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale di Studi*, 1980): 111-124. Another article on this topic is David Rosand, "Ermeneutica Amorosa: Observations on the Interpretation of Titian's Venuses," in the same book, pp. 375-81.
50. Crowe and Cavalcaselle, *The Life and Times*, Vol. II, p. 50. The source they are using here was unpublished at the time, numbered ii, 314. It was a letter from the thousands of Aretino's.

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*L'incendio nell'oliveto:*  
Rebellion or Disease?

While Grazia Deledda is most often dismissed as a regional writer, a lesser Verga of sorts, a study of the author's mature works (1900–1936) reveals that Deledda was not as removed from the literary influences of her day as has often been suggested. On the contrary, individual alienation from society, rebellion against traditional norms, and the problems of evil and suffering as unavoidable, integral elements of a dynamic universal mechanism, constitute the core of the moral problematic in Deledda's narrative. In this respect the Nuorese writer's art, though never deviating from a uniquely Sardinian inspiration, is indeed modern and surprisingly similar to that of her contemporaries in its attempt to deal with issues of a conflicting ethical and moral nature.

In his book, *Literary Diseases*, Gian Paolo Biasin examines the motif of disease in nineteenth and twentieth century Italian literature, suggesting among other things that “an analysis of the theme of disease is a valid instrument for tracing the very precise emergence and development of social consciousness in Italian literature, along with the related problem of marginality.”<sup>1</sup> Though Deledda is not mentioned by Biasin in his study of Verga, Svevo, Pirandello, and Gadda, her interest in the literary motif of disease and social marginality predates, in some instances, that of her better known contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

In *Colombi e sparvieri* (1912) for instance, Deledda confronted the psychosomatic manifestations of disease in the nervous paralysis of her protagonist, Jorgi Nieddu. Jorgi's paralysis is the result of a crisis of conscience, a reflection of his psychological immobility and his inability to fully break with a past which he claims to have rejected. *L'incendio nell'oliveto* (1917) demonstrates even more clearly Deledda's interest in adapting her narrative formula of sin-remorse-expiation and her fundamentally veristic themes (personal interest, material security, religion of the family, sanctity of tradition) to the modern metaphor of disease as an existential condition.

The plot of the novel revolves around the respected yet financially struggling Marini family. The main characters include the grandmother, Agostina; her daughter-in-law Nina; Agostina's grandchildren Annarosa and Agostino; and Agostina's only surviving son, Juanniccu. In arranging an economically crucial marriage for Annarosa, the family has set its sight on a well-to-do cousin of Annarosa's, Stefano Mura. Annarosa, however, is in love with a poor student, Gioele Sanna, who returns periodically to the village from Nuoro.

Agostina convinces her granddaughter to accept Stefano's proposal of marriage in the best interests of the family's financial future. Unbeknownst to all but Juanniccu, Nina has fallen in love with Stefano and subsequently resigns herself to the fact that he will marry instead her step-daughter. During the engagement dinner Juanniccu reveals the true sentiments of both Annarosa and Nina. Agostina and her grandson succeed in convincing all present that Juanniccu is simply half crazed and inebriated, understanding all the while that he must be silenced if the marriage proposal is to be salvaged.

Agostino takes his uncle to a remote farmhouse in the midst of the family owned olive groves where he beats and imprisons him until the marriage can take place. Upon learning of her brother's actions, Annarosa calls off the engagement but not soon enough to save her doomed uncle. Juanniccu sets fire to the farmhouse in which he is being held; the flames consume both him and the precious olive groves, the family's source of economic survival. Out of guilt over her uncle's death and in the face of imminent rejection by her ailing grandmother, Annarosa consents to marry Stefano in the final scene of the novel.

While the events in *L'incendio nell'oliveto* revolve around the economic necessity of a marriage between Annarosa and a wealthy individual whom she does not love, it is clear from the opening paragraphs that the central figures in the drama are two diametrically opposed and relatively sick individuals: the paralyzed octogenerian Agostina Marini, and her aging son, the alcoholic day-dreamer Juanniccu. All other significant characters in the novel can either be correlated or juxtaposed to Agostina and Juanniccu, suggesting that Deledda, in presenting two different interpretations of disease, is ambivalent, a "marginal" figure herself caught between the fundamental dialectics which permeate the novel: conformity or rebellion; faith or betrayal.<sup>3</sup>

In an extremely pertinent passage from an essay by Moravia which Biasin quotes can be found "in nuce" the problem of disease as presented by Deledda in *L'incendio nell'oliveto*.

Is disease, by creating diversity and modifying one's relation to the world, at the origin of an attitude of revolt? Or is the attitude of revolt, when it becomes impotent, the one that provokes disease? I believe in the former hypothesis. But with one correction. Disease and revolt are the same thing seen according to two different types of optics: for the 'righteous' man, revolt is disease; for the rebellious, disease is revolt.<sup>4</sup>

Agostina Marini is this type of righteous individual, an iron-handed matriarch and consummate realist for whom tradition, the Bible, and the family unit represent the only meaningful values worth striving for in life. In spite of her physical paralysis, a symbol of her psychological resistance to change, Agostina (a true "sparviero" in Deleddian terminology) has earned through her hawkish vigilance the respect, if not the love, of those under her protection.

Agostina's numerous sermons to family members inevitably have as their point of reference the Bible, this matriarch's justification for the power which she wields and for the obedience she demands. The suggestion that her authority and position are somehow divinely inspired instills a sense of fear and guilt in those who oppose her will. If in fact Agostina is a domestic idol of sorts,<sup>5</sup> she is also representative of a tradition which has lost much of its original function and meaning. In the case of Agostina, purely economic factors rather than ethics motivate

her choices: blind obedience to her wishes has become the norm in a family (and by extension a society) which has grown more and more accustomed to subordinating individual desires to the economic well-being of the group.<sup>6</sup>

Juanniccu, Agostina's wayward son, is the antithesis of his mother and all that she represents. These two contrasting figures embody the major dialectics in the novel: Agostina is reason personified, the symbol of tradition. Juanniccu is an irrational dreamer and the consummate threat of rebellion.

If one considers Juanniccu's "revolt" within the context of the previously cited statement by Moravia, it is clear that rebellion is synonymous with degeneracy, a moral deficiency or disease which makes the protagonist "la parte marcia della famiglia," "il verme nel frutto della casa." Juanniccu's alcoholism (a disease) is perceived by his mother as contributing to his physical and moral decay, both the cause and the effect of his failure to integrate himself into the respectable social structures of his world.

Eccoti lì, con le mani in tasca e i piedi parati al fuoco, con le scarpe fangose come quelle dei pezzenti vagabondi. E dove sei stato? Sono tre giorni che non ti vedo. Del resto è meglio che non ti veda. Mi sembri l'immagine vivente dei miei peccati. E chi ti può vedere? Ti si sopporta perché si è cristiani; e basta. Tutti gli altri della mia famiglia hanno fatto buona riuscita: tu solo sei come l'ultimo pane andato a male, che nessuno vuole. Hai cinquant'anni e sei lì come un bambino che ne ha tre. (p. 18)

Juanniccu differs significantly from previous Deleddian protagonists in that he is neither overly traumatized by his dilemma (as is Elias in *Elias Portolu* in the face of his incestuous passion for his sister-in-law) nor particularly bitter (as is Marianna in *Marianna Sirca* who defies her family's wishes by loving an ex-servant turned bandit). While it may be argued that this is because his "sin" or infraction does not fall within the limits of a strictly enforced societal taboo per say—unsanctioned love or patricide<sup>7</sup>—it would seem rather that Juanniccu's indifference to his situation stems from his particular brand of rebellion. His indolence, his unwillingness to blindly conform, and his disregard for familial and societal norms of conduct is not perceived as revolt in itself



(something which is never admissible in the tightly knit structure of Deledda's insular society) but rather as disease, under which guise it becomes at least partially tolerated. Juanniccu's rebellious and often irrational behavior is necessarily viewed as a kind of mental imbalance in that it threatens social stability and in particular the crucial pending marriage between Annarosa and Stefano on which the family's survival hinges.

Hence the logical conclusion that Zio Juanniccu is in fact mad. In a very Pirandellian sense he is tolerated only insofar as he is considered deranged. As such his marginality is conveniently labeled as disease when in truth "disease" is nothing more than a pretext for revolt, and a tragic one at that. It is, as Moravia noted regarding the problem in general, "the attitude of revolt when it becomes impotent." In other words, the only viable protest for those who sense that real opposition to the power structures in this particular society is impossible. In both a poignant and pathetic moment, Juanniccu conveys this lucid insight to Nina who considers the realization of her own dreams as "un impeto di ribellione pazzo."

Invece non siamo mai liberi. E non lo siamo perché non vogliamo esserlo. Se tu volevi esserlo, potevi prenderti quell'uomo; e Annarosa si prendeva il suo ragazzo e così stavate contente tutt'e due, almeno per un po' di tempo. Ma è che qui, in questa casa, poi, si è tutti come ragazzi: si cerca tutti di disobbedire, ma non si può. No si può, non si può. (p. 119)

Clearly Deledda is not interested in madness as a pathological disorder but rather as a metaphor for the existential condition, for the sense of helplessness and solitude of the individual who retreats into feigned madness in order to escape; to avoid persecution from a society whose values he knows to be false and ethically unsound. There is always a disturbing truth in every "mad" statement Juanniccu makes. His introspection and intuition regarding other characters' underlying motivations suggests an undeniable correlation between his disease and truth. As Annarosa admits in an intense moment of remorse:

Non è cattivo, il povero zio Juanniccu, solo ha il *difetto* di dire la *verità*, come nessuno più osa dirla, e anche Cristo fu ucciso per aver detto la verità. (p. 211)

Deledda's religiosity aside for the moment, it is obvious that Juanniccu is intended as a symbol of conscience, a mirror in which all the characters recognize the truth which they have discarded and the lies which now govern their lives.<sup>8</sup> Even the rigid Agostino, Juanniccu's nephew who beats him and who is ultimately responsible for his uncle's death, "pensava che gli ubriaconi e gli idioti a volte parlano ispirati da una volontà che non è la loro, ma la volontà stessa di Dio" (p. 140). Hardly coincidental is the fact that Juanniccu's presence is most disconcerting to those who have repressed what he expresses; to those who oppose his idea of a legitimate alternative reality based on love rather than on sheer authority, and on an understanding of the fragility of human nature.

Ecco, io dico, a mio parere, che bisognerebbe lasciar fare a ciascuno quello che vuole. Tanto è lo stesso; quello che si vuol fare si fa. La donna è fragile e anche l'uomo. Siamo tutti fragili. Non importa nulla . . . Si vive, si muore; si fanno tanti sforzi per riuscire a questo, per privarci di quello, e poi si muore. E se quei due ragazzi si vogliono amare e si vogliono sposare, perché volete voi impedirlo? (p. 47-48)

Deledda's view of human nature as fragile yet resilient (or as the title of a previous novel suggests, human nature as analogous to "reeds in the wind") is very much at the heart of *L'incendio nell'oliveto* and its treatment of rebellion vs. disease. In general, Deleddian characters feel constrained to adapt to a traditional code of behavior which conflicts with their most basic instincts. Faced with the choice of whether to conform or to be emarginated, they are paralyzed by guilt, fear, and subsequent indecision. Unable to survive in a very real sense outside the "clan" or community, yet without the necessary faith and strength of their own convictions, these individuals continue to be governed "fatalistically" by the laws of a society which are in essence devoid of meaning for them. While this type of moral crisis sounds decidedly more veristic than modern, Deledda's artistic lens focuses on the torment of the individual caught between a sense of duty and nostalgia towards the past and a paradoxical desire to break free from those very same repressive bonds.

Annarosa is the emblematic dove/victim, tormented and suspended between the antithetical poles of duty and desire. Juanniccu, however, harbors no illusions about the weakness of human nature or man's

reluctance to take responsibility for his actions. He does not rail against fate but rather accepts the conditions of exile in a less ironic, yet not totally dissimilar manner as Pirandello's Henry IV. By retreating into a world of feigned madness, imposed upon him initially yet never wholly rejected ("Sono pazzo perché sono pazzo"), Juanniccu is allowed his moral protest, at once a participant and an observer of the tragicomedy of his own and others' lives.

In the final analysis, however, Juanniccu's "disease" threatens the very fabric of the social structure and must be eliminated.<sup>9</sup> Juanniccu's chief antagonists in the novel are precisely his mother whose ideology he rejects and his nephew who is the embodiment of those very ideals. It is ultimately Agostino's decision to lock his uncle in the family's distant farmhouse for it is Agostino who has labored diligently for the family's survival and who stands to lose all by his unrestrained actions. Juanniccu's expulsion from the community, his death by fire in the farmhouse, satisfies this society's very ancient need to purge itself (via a necessary scapegoat) of its "diseased" or undesirable elements.<sup>10</sup>

Much of the novel's modernity stems from Juanniccu's status as a quintessential observer of human nature. Unlike so many other Deleddian outcasts, however, he understands with startling clarity the terms of his more or less self-imposed exile. Consequently he asks for and expects nothing from the world whose values he has rejected. His world is not in fact the world of exteriors and objectivity in which he physically exists ("il viso morto di Juanniccu e gli occhi vaghi parevano affacciarsi da un mondo lontano, torbido, ma guardavano di qua, e osservavano le cose del mondo dei vivi") but rather a very subjective, interior world in which he alternates between extremely lucid vision and confused, anguished remorse. His alcoholism serves as a counterpoint for his introspection, and in a strange way provides the necessary vehicle for guilt which is typical of all Deledda's characters.

The need to self-castigate as well as to invite punishment and derision by others satisfies such individuals' self-destructive tendencies, individuals who see punishment as obligatory for having failed to abide by societal norms which they are incapable of rejecting in a forthright and constructive fashion.

Zio Juanniccu tornò più presto del solito, quella sera. Con tanto freddo, non aveva che la giacca leggera, tutta abbottonata, col risvolto unto tirato

sul collo rientrante fra le spalle. Senza togliersi le mani delle tasche dei pantaloni battè col piede alla porta chiusa, pensando che se voleva poteva fabbricarsi non una ma cento chiavi, da aprire tutte le porte del mondo; ma non voleva; preferiva picchiare col piede e aspettare che la serva aprisse e magari lo rimbrottasse per essere tornato tardi; così non scontentare quelli di casa che amavano fargli subire queste umiliazioni. Umiliazioni? Non lo erano poiché in fondo non lo toccavano. (p. 41)

There is no sense of disdain or humiliation conveyed in this passage since Juanniccu remains outside the sensibilities of this exterior world. During his mother's diatribes against him, Juanniccu "ascoltava senza protestare ma anche senza commuoversi" suggesting the perverse yet ever present idea in Deleddian narrative that punishment is necessitated by the infraction of silent laws even though there may be no logical justification for such punishment. Whereas early in her career Deledda tended to favor novels of "crime and punishment," concrete offenses which by their very heinous nature demanded retribution, in later works "sins" are far more subjective, defined primarily by ingrained attitudes and an obsessive, irrational obedience to archaic codes of social behavior.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of psychological immobility which impedes an individual from breaking with the past is best exemplified in the novel by the tragic death of Juanniccu. In a final desperate act of protest he sets fire to the farmhouse in which he is being held captive. The olive grove, a symbol of the economic motivations which have dominated throughout the novel, is destroyed as is Juanniccu in an ultimate act of self-destruction. Much of the gloom which pervades the end of the novel results from the realization that Juanniccu has been defeated by a stronger yet not morally superior force. He is, in a very marxist sense, an authentic individual in a world degraded by economic needs: the "sick" man who is spiritually healthy in a "sane" world which is morally deficient.

Juanniccu's end strikes a hopeless chord which is resounded in the fates of other characters: Annarosa consents to a marriage with Stefano, a man she does not love; Nina resigns herself to a life of loneliness; and the servant Mikedda marries the servant Taneddu employing her typical rationale "i servi coi servi, i padroni con i padroni." The sole glimmer of hope in the novel is found in another marginal figure, Annarosa's love, Gioele.

Not coincidentally Gioele is young, he is a student, and he is a rebel; a more positive correlative of the doomed Juanniccu. Though he appears only once in the novel, Gioele animates the plot, undermining the efforts of Agostina and those who see his love for Annarosa as a practical impossibility. He is the nemesis in particular of Agostina who views his defects as far more than physical.

Se ha quel difetto non è colpa sua; è nato così e non lo hanno saputo curare a tempo, perché erano poveri . . . Povertà e cattiva stirpe son cose tristi, Annaro'! E tu hai parlato bene, poco fa; ognuno al suo posto, ognuno col suo decoro. (pp. 36-37).

For Agostina, Gioele's real handicap is poverty and poor social standing. Deleddian protagonists' preoccupation with material and class concerns stemmed from particular socio-economic conditions which required obedience to familial authority in order to insure survival.<sup>12</sup> Gioele rejects tradition predicated on these grounds and is thus classifiable with other enlightened Deleddian characters who have been exposed to both the positive and negative aspects of a much larger world beyond the confines of the village. Like Juanniccu, he possesses a knowledge which threatens, as is evidenced in this passage from one of his letters to Annarosa.

Ma tu mi darai ascolto; perché adesso non è più il povero Gioele che ti parla, ma il tuo istinto stesso della vita, il tuo diritto alla gioia.

Tu vuoi sacrificarti per la famiglia; ma chi è poi la tua famiglia? È la tua nonna, già *morta*, che vi tiene legati tutti intorno al suo *cadavere* di ferro come ad un pernio. È lei, la vera rappresentante della tua razza, *paralizzata* dalla *vecchiaia* e dalla sua stessa *immobilità*. (p. 57)

The images of death and disease which punctuate Gioele's pleas relate specifically to Agostina and by extension to Deledda's society as a whole. While Deledda by 1917 had obviously made the crucial break with her culture, it was painfully evident to her that others had not and would never, given the high cost of rebellion in terms of emotional pain and permanent emargination.<sup>13</sup>

That Deledda opts for a union between Annarosa and Stefano (rather than between Annarosa and Gioele) is not so much an indication of her own moral stance as it is her acquiescence to a "via di mezzo" for her characters. The fundamental difference between Gioele the rebel and Stefano, a moderate, may be taken as a final comment on the

novel: the former represents personal and collective salvation via change while the latter expresses hope for the future via assimilation. Though the ultimate solution is by no means a positive one in terms of the alternatives it offers for those who have subordinated their desires for the well-being of the group, Deledda sees it as the only plausible one in an inert society still dominated, except in rare instances, by traditional authority figures. Such unique individuals in *L'incendio nell'oliveto* are the marginal figures of Juanniccu and Gioele, both "diseased" characters who have been eliminated as obstacles by the novel's end.

While Deledda's handling of the theme of disease is perhaps less dramatic than that of Pirandello (and certainly lacking in the humor of Svevo) it is no less problematic in its approach. It is true that Deledda rarely varied the Sardinian settings and characters which inspired her writing. Yet there is a universality to Deledda's art recognized by those who awarded her the Nobel Prize for literature in 1926. *L'incendio nell'oliveto* treats the problem of disease as rebellion within the perimeters of a particular sociological context, yet the moral dilemmas presented within the text are addressed to an audience much more contemporary than Deledda's own isolated Barbaricina society. The result is a novel which not only transcends the boundaries of time and place in its message but one which also reaffirms Deledda's position in the ranks of modern Italian literature.

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## Notes

1. Gian Paolo Biasin, *Literary Diseases* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1975) p. 34.
2. In particular that of Italo Svevo whose *La coscienza di Zeno* was not published till 1923, and that of Luigi Pirandello whose "Enrico IV" was published in 1922.
3. Biasin, p. 14. The author refers to Emile Durkheim's conception of the marginality of disease as a mirror of the writer's own marginality. In the case of Deledda, the theory is particularly applicable given the strong autobiographical undercurrent in all her works as well as a perception of self as rebel/outcast in her own society. See the author's quasi autobiographical work "Cosima" in *Opere Scelte*, a cura di Eurialo De Michelis, vol. II (Milano: Mondadori, 1964).

4. Biasin, p. 23.

5. Grazia Deledda, *L'incendio nell'oliveto*, edizione "Oscar" (Milano: Mondadori, 1977). All references to the work will be indicated parenthetically within the text unless otherwise noted. Underlining in all cases is my own. "Dopo tutto la nonna era la cosa più sacra, per lei la colonna più ferma della sua vita. Le parole della nonna erano tutte vere: erano la verità stessa. E quella sua immobilità, nel silenzio e nella solitudine della stanza quasi povera, quella sua pesantezza di bronzo, l'aureola del fuoco le davano un aspetto di idolo domestico." Ibid., 35.

6. "È giovane ancora, lei," pensava la suocera. "Non ha bisogno di tinture, ha bisogno ancora di amore. Ma Stefano non lo puoi prendere, no, Nina mia, perché è destinato ad Annarosa; lo sapevi che era destinato a lei perché lo hai guardato? Adesso bisogna che ti rassegni, per il bene della famiglia. Per il bene della famiglia ti parlo, Nina mia: e tu mi ascolti e mi intendi . . ." Ibid., 108.

7. For a thorough discussion on the subject of taboo in Deledda's works see Anna Dolfi's "Le restrizioni e 'le delire de toucher' " in *Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Mursia, 1979).

8. Deledda, *L'incendio*. "Poi la speranza d'ingannarsi la riprese. Vedeva la figura pallida e cascante dello zio ubriaco, quelle spalle incurvate dal peso di una vita che tende al basso . . . Aveva parlato da ubriaco; nulla era vero delle sue parole. Ma in fondo ella sentiva bene che tutto era vero; le parole di lui le erano cadute nell'anima come pietre nell'acqua; l'ombra del dubbio poteva coprirle, ma non le smoveva." 159.

9. "Domani questo idiota di nostro zio andrà ancora dal vecchio e continuerà a dirgli pazzie" pensava Agostino. "Bisognerà impedirglielo: bisogna educarlo come un ragazzo. Perché non l'ho fatto prima?" S'irrigidì, col pugno sulla tavola come quando faceva i suoi calcoli; ma un lieve tremito gli scuoteva il polso: poi sentì che la nonna lo guardava e la guardò. Si intesero. Si promettevano di essere forti, di essere sempre le colonne della famiglia." Ibid., 141.

10. On scapegoats in general and their function in primitive societies see Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: St. Martin, 1976) 3rd ed., Chapter LVII.

11. For a provocative discussion of the subject see Anna Dolfi, *Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Mursia 1979) pp. 141-169.

12. See in particular Maria Giacobbe, *Grazia Deledda. Introduzione alla Sardegna* (Milano: Bompiani, 1974) and Mario Massaiu, *La Sardegna di Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Celuc, 1972).

13. This attitude dominates throughout the entire body of Deledda's narrative and is confirmed in the author's vast epistolary prior to 1900, the year of her departure from Sardinia. See Francesco Di Pilla, *La vita e l'opera di Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Fabbri, 1966).

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## Dalla lettura alla scrittura femminile

La poesia femminile deve essere « femminista », si urlava su antologie del « rosso '70 », si sospirava finalmente l'abbandono di un tipo di poesia lenta e musicale, immobile in un tempo « senza storia ». Al rifiuto del cliché poetico femminile o forse tradizionale, si oppone una violenta poesia che ha sapore già di transizione, di antitesi, premessa necessaria ad una armonica ed appagante sintesi. « La mia bara si è aperta/ la mia morte ha smesso di viaggiare/ e io sono uscita da una nuova placenta/ la placenta storica... » (Candiani);<sup>1</sup> « Le false cantilene/ che ci controllavano anche il sonno/ nel letto rumoroso/ di foglie di granoturco/ ora crediamo alla terra liquorosa/ ... » (Dania Lupi). Significativa è la chiusa della suddetta antologia: « dolci poesie/ che ricamavano/ bellissime emozioni/ che mi portavano/ lente e musicali/ in atmosfere viola/ nella magia/ delle cose senza storia/ il vostro tempo è finito... » (Candiani).

La secolare accettazione del Logos maschile era la chiave di lettura della donna proiettata già verso il suo iter travagliato di scrittura. Nella nebbia rabbiosa il femminile fu deviato a passività, per « risorgere » ad una posizione attiva, mascolina ma frutto di una errata dicotomia e di un ingenuo biologismo. Femminista fu l'atto della sedizione, sedarlo invece opera della conquistata autocoscienza femminile nel poetico. Dal « Degré zero » stilistico (Frabotta) si giungerà al « Risveglio » stilistico di una scrittura divergente, la cui biforcazione verso il privato è un'apparente contraddizione femminile, l'espressione del non detto: « Statiche e spente sul muro/ rammaricano le ore dell'alba/ il filo teso del tuo occhio/ riporto di una notte espansa/ a cielo aperto e chiuso/ su un eden di lupi, semidei/ insonnoliti tigri/ e donnole senza pelo



ti vezzeggiano/ e innalzano lo Stelo di Giada/ che subito mi mostra il muso/ se emersa dalla teca dei sogni/ io ridivento vera per farti le fusa ». (Frabotta).

Ed ora l'assenza e il desiderio con una nota e delicata movenza del verso, si inorgogliscono della loro piena rinascita, del senso non acquisito ma conquistato e difeso dal pensiero significante, dal potente Logos femminile. Non siamo ad una svolta, le poetesse dell'addio alle « bellissime emozioni » di una poesia maschile, memore solo di delicate movenze di donnafantasma, avevano già chiaro il senso ultimo della loro rivolta: « il lento/ ma sicuro spezzarsi/ delle catene femminili ». Come riappropriarsi di un mondo che era anche loro se non dopo aver urlato, fino a sentirlo nelle ossa, il loro essere altro? Solo dopo un « uragano » che ha spazzato tutto ciò che si è trovato davanti, forma, metro, rima, scarnificando il verso fino a renderlo slogan, solo dopo questo ci si poteva riappropriare dei contenuti universali, ormai finalmente nuovi. Delle esperienze che hanno fatto la poesia di sempre, ecco allora la notte: « Io so la fonte che zampilla e scorre/ benché sia notte, la so ritrovare/ benché sia notte e un grappolo di notti/ notte del cielo e notte/ del bosco; notte della lontananza,/ notte di tutto il tempo che è trascorso/ dal primo scaturire » (Guidacci, « Fonte »)<sup>2</sup> Ecco l'amore: « È come una mancanza/ di respiro ed un senso di morire/ quando mi stringe improvviso/ il desiderio di te tanto lontano/ e nulla può colmarlo... ». (Guidacci, « Come una mancanza di respirare »); ecco la passione: « L'unica espressione vera è la passione/ la verità glaciale e solitaria/ al passaggio di luci fisse/ stordisce per paura e incomprensione/ se giudichi parodie di sentenze/ riprendo il mio posto abituale/ come un marmo policromo bagnato/ offro una bella immagine superficiale » (Granzotto, « Posto abituale »).

Poesie diverse nella loro inamovibile resistenza, nel percorso di un pensiero luminoso e determinato nel freddo di una notte che si ripete, nella semplicità di esprimere una mancanza tanto acuminata tanto inerte, nella definizione della passione e della reticenza ad abbandonare il suo status siderale. È facile rintracciare nella sua pluriforme natura il tema dell'assenza, sentimento ora finalmente vissuto come traguardo, non più come un vuoto da riempire. Un traguardo dunque da raggiungere, da superare, da trattenere ma non a guisa di ricordo frustrante. Ciò che è connotato come elemento femminile non è più marchio ma

sigillo che distingue un'individualità ormai costituita. Parlare d'intimismo in poesia, comunque, non concerne una preclusione alla storia in quanto reale, all'alter in quanto pubblico, l'io poetico infatti continuerà sempre a « parlarsi » e a « parlare ».

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## Notes

1. *Poesia femminista italiana*, a cura di L. Di Nola con interventi di B. Frabotta, M. Bettarini e S. Pettrignani (Roma, Savelli, 1978).
2. *Poesia d'amore, L'assenza e il desiderio*, a cura di F. Pansa e M. Bucchi (Roma, Newton Compton, 1986).

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## Book Review

JORDAN, CONSTANCE, *Pulci's Morgante: Poetry and History in Fifteenth Century Florence*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1986, pp. 216.

In claiming that Luigi Pulci's *Morgante* is a propagandistic assertion of Medicean supremacy and "divine right to rule," Constance Jordan dances to a trendy Marxist tune. Unfortunately in *Pulci's Morgante: Poetry and History in Fifteenth Century Florence*, Ms. Jordan does not have the fancy footwork, nor the historical grounding, to substantiate her claim. The title of this recent study, as well as its introduction, are enticing; both promise an interdisciplinary look at Quattrocento Florence, at one of the Medici circle intimates, and at a less-studied epic poem. Ms. Jordan stumbles into the same trap as many art historians: she claims too much premeditated intention on the part of poet and patron without evidencing her hypotheses with documentation. Apart from the introduction, little use is made in the text of letters, chronicles or other historical evidence to complement the literary textual points. This is the allure of interdisciplinary studies and the dilemma of scholars who attempt them: the possibility to explore delicate and complex interrelationships is great, the catch is not to lose sight of one or the other perspective. Ms. Jordan errs on the side of the literary critic, to the point that one seriously questions her choice of subtitle. It is strikingly misleading, as this review shall reveal.

In her introduction, Ms. Jordan provides historical background: a brief biography of Luigi Pulci, his relationship to the Medici, and some

discussion of Medici power. Her explanation of the sociopolitical milieu is superficial, based on Rubinstein's *The Government of Florence* (1966), ignoring studies much more recent, extensive and germane to the topic of Medicean ascendancy and control (Dale Kent, John Majemy, et. al.). Her use of Pulci's correspondence with Medici family members, and references from important chronicles such as Villani and Dati suggest that she will be incorporating these into the body of her work. Instead, these are a gloss found only in the introduction.

The body of the book, as a glance at the table of contents reveals, is primarily devoted to a traditional literary analysis. The first chapter, "The Form of the Narrative," is a straightforward structural analysis, replete with diagrams and models. Forcing Pulci's narrative into schematic frameworks and patterns which depict plot progression is not as enlightened an approach to the work as one expects after the introduction. The entire chapter's validity is called into question by the author herself at the end of the chapter: "The partial or subjective nature of my analysis justified my unwillingness to elevate it to the status of a demonstration of structure. Critiques of structuralist interpretations . . . render theoretically indefensible both structuralist methodology and critical programs designed to produce objective analysis." (57) The author then admits that the methodology used to analyze part 1 of the poem is useless in analyzing the second part, whose structure is "not patterned." (58)

The second chapter, "Models of Chivalry," deals with literary precedents in the French tradition and Arthurian legends. Once again, the analysis is conventional, limited strictly to an interpretation of the plot. At times, Ms. Jordan suggests a historical link, but leaves it disappointingly unresolved. For example, the provocative statement "The politicization of the figure of Rinaldo continues to be a feature of the *Morgante*," (79) promises more historical explanation. Ms. Jordan dismisses us with a few pat references to well-known civic icons: the lion, Hercules. Nowhere does she mention the *Marzocco* by name, nor does she supply rudimentary art historical examples of how and why and where these symbols stand for Florence, or how an audience or indeed the patron Medici would react to such imagery. Thus she only briefly suggests a use of political symbolism. This aspect deserves much more attention if one considers that the Medici, who commissioned the work,

were a family with an enormous repertoire of its own personal, significant emblems and symbols. If Pulci is truly trying to write a history of the Medici and their manifest destiny to rule, as Ms. Jordan claims in her introduction and throughout the book, would he not also adorn his work with Medici imagery? Again, one is reminded of the art historical parallel, where artistic commissions and architectural monuments commissioned by the Medici are replete with their various personal insignia.

Ms. Jordan gets bogged down in discussion of "time models" which she says Pulci uses, and which are an important factor of his "perspectivism"—a term she coins but does not define until the end of chapter 3. It is this, "the constitution of a subject by repeated representations, each registering a different aspect of it," (124) which Ms. Jordan believes to be Pulci's theory of history. She discusses at length other theories of history from Boethius to Villani, yet we are unconvinced of Pulci's participation. Nowhere does Ms. Jordan demonstrate that Pulci actually read or contemplated theories of history in his supposed attempt to formulate his own.

In the third chapter, "Typical Adventures," Ms. Jordan is back to a formalist analysis in classifying plot events. She bases much of her argument on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Latin poetry and mythology. Pulci's humanistic training was limited, as Ms. Jordan points out early in the book. Yet she only admits in a footnote to Pulci's dubious familiarity with these works: "It is impossible to know the extent of Pulci's knowledge of medieval and Renaissance mythography. I have assumed he had a general knowledge of the most common interpretations of popular myths . . . I find it hard to imagine he did not know Boccaccio's *Genealogie*, although there is no direct evidence that he did" (199). The most glaring error is when Ms. Jordan misidentifies Luigi Pulci as the author of the *Ciriffo Calvaneo*, when in fact it is Luigi's brother Luca. Unfortunately, Ms. Jordan also bases some discussion of Luigi's poetical development on his authorship. This kind of sloppiness makes it difficult to give credence to her arguments.

The final chapter, "Poetry and History," is as disappointing as it is misleading. Perhaps "Poetry and Historiography" would be a better title, yet one questions Ms. Jordan's criteria in judging a historian. She states that Pulci's most important contribution to the *Morgante* was

“the judicious discrimination that would convincingly establish it as a *factual* rather than a fantastic *fiction*” (125) (emphasis mine). Why Ms. Jordan insists on Pulci’s role as willing and conscious Medicean historian in the face of such scanty, strictly literary evidence, is obscure. She states herself in the preface: “When Pulci began writing his poem, he did not realize, I think, that he was in possession of all the elements with which to articulate the central concerns of historiography.” Why Ms. Jordan imposes that task upon him is unclear. To base an argument upon Pulci’s claim to be Carlo Magno’s best historian is to base an argument on a literary *topos*: all epic poets claim to sing as no other previous bard. The attempt to historically quantify and legitimize this hyperbolic and conventional claim is unsuccessful. I think Ms. Jordan’s main problem lies in the fact that there is no historical evidence to demonstrate that Pulci was anything other than a poet, and not the historian concerned with the development of historiography she would like him to be. He was a poet of the vernacular, and contrary to what Ms. Jordan states, this was unremarkable: “The fact that Pulci was virtually alone among the poets and historians of the Medici circle in writing in a popular vein was probably in his favor” (26). Lorenzo himself was the author of poetry “in the popular vein,” with “La Nencia da Barberino” and the *canti carnascialeschi*. Such claims force one to question Ms. Jordan’s understanding and familiarity with Quattrocento Florence, its milieu and literature.

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## Book Review

KLAPISCH-ZUBER, CHRISTIANE, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 338.

Those of us with an ardent feminist bent can greet the English publication of Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's essays on *Women, Family and Ritual* with cries of joy; however, it is not an unalloyed joy. Unfortunate lapses of methodological rigor, as well as instances of excess bias, mar what is otherwise a sound and needed series of studies.<sup>1</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber draws much of her work from the great Florentine *catasto* of 1427–30. The *catasto* consisted of the tax records of approximately 60,000 families residing in Florence and the surrounding Tuscan countryside under its sway (excepting Siena and Lucca).<sup>2</sup> Klapisch-Zuber begins by discussing the methodological use made of that vast document and some of the demographic insights which it afforded.<sup>3</sup> She then explores whether there might have been a change in familial structure from the later Middle Ages into the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> She uses the city of Prato, in Florentine Tuscany, as a model to determine the answer for the late fourteenth to late fifteenth centuries. It is here, in impersonal statistical compilations and straightforward reportage, that Klapisch-Zuber is at her best. Using a number of *catasti* and *estimi* from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, she traces the disastrous effects on family composition after the Black Death.<sup>5</sup>

Prato was a town already in decline at the advent of the plague, and by 1410, after successive waves of plague, had been reduced to 950

households from 4,000 in 1310.<sup>6</sup> As the epidemics abated in severity, children, always the hardest hit, rebounded in numbers. Women, however, continued to remain fewer than men, a poignant attestation to the fact that, in rebuilding the population from the bottom through birth, women sacrificed themselves from the top the same way. Klapisch-Zuber states that it is difficult to ascertain the reasons for this “differential decline in the ratio of women to men,”<sup>7</sup> but it would seem that a double vulnerability to both the Black Death and child-birth could account for a good deal.<sup>8</sup>

One result of the drastic population reduction was a change in matrimonial practices. The average age of women at marriage fell at the end of the thirteenth century, but as the population stabilized, ages rose again somewhat.<sup>9</sup> Households were down to 3.4 persons on the average in 1371, as opposed to 3.9 in 1339, but on the rise again to 3.7 persons in 1427. The number of households headed by women fell, and more tended to be headed by older males in conformity with the general aging of the population. Extended families became more common with more and more married sons residing at home with their fathers.<sup>10</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber's more pressing concern, however, is the condition of women in her carefully described households. One could say from her figures that discrimination against females (at least as represented in Florence) began at birth. Although the general practice during the fifteenth century was to put more infants out to nurse—seemingly without prejudice, Klapisch-Zuber suggests that the statistics tell a different story.<sup>11</sup>

Paying a *balia*<sup>12</sup> to raise one's infant was, it appears, less prevalent in the fourteenth than in the fifteenth century, and confined at that time almost entirely to the most prominent families.<sup>13</sup> After 1450, however, she asserts that one-half of the families were of fairly modest circumstances.<sup>14</sup> Contracts between the family of the infant and the family of the nurse were arranged strictly by the father of the infant. The mother appears to have been almost entirely excluded from the proceedings, as she is rarely mentioned. The father most usually contracted to send the child to the home of the nursing couple. This was the most economical solution and represented a considerable savings in salary.<sup>15</sup> Having a nurse take a child into her home, naturally meant



a separation from the child for periods up to three years (fifteenth century contracts generally stipulated thirty months). History is silent on how the mother felt about this separation, but Florentines rationalized the necessity by praising the salubrious air of the countryside and other benefits of rural life.<sup>16</sup>

It was at the time of weaning, according to Klapisch-Zuber, that subtle differences in attitudes of fathers towards sons or daughters appeared to manifest themselves. Weaning began, from her sample of well-documented contracts, on the average at 18.7 months and the child returned home at about 20.4 months. In some cases, the child was transferred to another nurse who specialized in weaning, or was left with the same nurse who was paid less during the period in which the child gradually shifted to a more solid diet. In some cases this period lasted up to six months. Klapisch-Zuber attempts to prove that Florentines were more willing to pay for an extended period of weaning for their sons than for their daughters. Her statistics, however, do not support her contentions, since two-thirds of all children, of either sex, appear to have been weaned abruptly and simply returned home. For only a small number of children does she show that more girls than boys made this difficult transition without gradual withdrawal. Girls were, however, nursed for a somewhat shorter period than boys—18 months on the average as against an average of 19.4 months for the boys.<sup>17</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber introduces considerable anecdotal material throughout her essays to support her allegations of discrimination against females. Unfortunately, she has a tendency to pick examples which do the most to undermine her thesis. For example, she reports the case of one father who laments the premature leavetaking of the nurse in June, "when she had promised us to remain with us until September, so that we could avoid having Cecchina weaned during the great heat and before she has all her teeth." Certainly this is an instance of proper parental concern for the well-being of one's child.<sup>18</sup> In addition, she cites one Tribaldo dei Rossi, who deplors the fact that poverty forces him to conclude the breastfeeding of his daughter, Maddalena, at one year, when her brothers and sisters had nursed for up to twenty months. Klapisch-Zuber's claim is that this is a statement not just of financial difficulties, but of sexual discrimination as well. To my mind, Maddalena's father speaks to us not as Klapisch-Zuber would have it, coolly

indifferent, but with every appearance of genuine distress. Birth order definitely served Maddalena badly, however that is no evidence that gender entered into the matter.<sup>19</sup>

Other questions arise with regard to Klapisch-Zuber's accuracy when dealing with gender. In Chapter Five, "Childhood in Tuscany," she claims that putting a child out to nurse "may have represented more of a threat to girls than to boys. Florentine parents, in fact, left their babies of the fair sex with a nurse longer than their sons."<sup>20</sup> This is in direct contradiction to the picture she paints in Chapter Seven, which I have discussed above. Furthermore this contradicts another statement Klapisch-Zuber makes in Chapter Seven that infant mortality was higher among male infants put out to nurse than it was for female. Inconsistently again, she stresses that breastfeeding provided a better overall chance for survival—better, certainly, than those poor innocents who filled the foundling homes.<sup>21</sup>

It is probable that in the cases of foundlings, Klapisch-Zuber does not overstate when she blames indifference to the well-being of girls. Many more girls than boys were recorded as being taken into the hospices.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, more girls than boys seem to have been abandoned in times of crisis than in times of relative peace.<sup>23</sup> The charge of gender discrimination seems to be real, although, once again we must be careful with Klapisch-Zuber's conclusions. Because more girls than boys suffered abandonment, she judges this to be one reason for the imbalance of the sexes between the ages of one and seven.<sup>24</sup> She ignores that fact that infant mortality was higher in general for infant boys than for infant girls (except possibly during periods of plague).<sup>25</sup> This would have somewhat reduced the imbalance, even accepting the larger number of abandoned females, unless the girls were deliberately starved.

A girl of the upper classes need not fear the foundling homes, but abandonment of another sort. She might be educated at home, however it was equally possible that she would be educated in a convent. Separated from her family by the age of seven, she would remain in the convent until marriage, if so destined. If intended for the religious life, she would remain there forever.<sup>26</sup>

The most common age for marriage was between 17 and 18 for young women.<sup>27</sup> If a girl had been educated in the convent, she would pass

as a stranger from the house of her father to the house of her husband, where, because of her "foreign" lineage, she would be even more a stranger. Frequently, her husband would be much older than she. She would often find herself the step-mother of six or eight children, destined to add eight or ten of her own to the already tumultuous brood. Spoken of only in reference to her father or husband, she would be forgotten quickly. If she were mentioned in the *ricordi*, there would be an explanation of this untoward inclusion, as though the chronicler needed to excuse himself. Most often, while alliances with important lineages were recorded, the given name of the women who "built" the alliance would be omitted.<sup>28</sup>

If widowed young, a woman of the upper class would become a pawn in a relentless game of political and economic chess. Although theoretically she had some options concerning the way she would live the rest of her life, in actuality she would be subject to ruthless pressures. On the one hand, the pressure would come from her own family wanting her to remarry in order to reuse her dowry, and on the other from her husband's family wishing her to stay and keep the dowry with them.<sup>29</sup> Dowries, were "irrevocably attached . . . to the physical person of the woman for the duration of her life,"<sup>30</sup> and, if a widow could be coaxed home, her dowry came with her. If she were young enough, her remarriage was a chance for her family to possibly make a more advantageous alliance, or at least create a "whole new circle of affines."<sup>31</sup> A most unfortunate consequence of this custom was that when a widow went home, she took her dowry but not her children. Children "belonged" to their paternal lineage. It was rare that their maternal kin would take them in, and nearly inconceivable that a step-father would accept them. When the mother left, taking her dowry, the children were abandoned to a destitute fate, except through the intercession of their charitable agnatic kinfolk.<sup>32</sup>

Imagine the dilemma for the young widowed mother. All her life she had been taught obedience, first to her father, then to her husband. On the death of their husbands, many young women reverted to earlier habits—subservience to their own families. The weight of public opinion, in addition, was on them to remarry. If they remained unmarried they were suspect, even older widows were subject to the accusation of unchastity. As virtual aliens in their husband's families, they could look

forward to a bleak existence at best, and submission to the demands of their own lineage separated them from their children forever.

Those women who bowed to the pressures exerted by their families were characterized as “cruel” mothers<sup>33</sup>—greedy, heartless, avid, inconstant, etc. Only a few men were able to look beyond their male biases and see to the truth of the problem, and only a few of these came to the defense of woman’s position. One such was Giovanni Gherardi of Prato, who wrote *Paradiso degli Alberti* about 1425. In that courtly discussion he pitted a young man who denigrates women against a young woman “of great wit and of most noble manners.”<sup>34</sup> The young woman turns the man’s own words against him when she states that since women are less perfect than men, they must therefore obey and follow them.<sup>35</sup>

The young woman’s spirited defense provides us with some insight into the way women really felt in their situations. What Klapisch-Zuber fails to acknowledge is that it provides some clue to the way men felt as well. The two do not seem to be all that far apart, if Gherardi was at all representative.<sup>36</sup> Sadly, men were trapped by the very institutions they themselves had made.

The dowry was one such institution. Generally deplored,<sup>37</sup> it nevertheless flourished. What would make generations cling to a system that seemingly worked such a hardship? The notion that the dowry was the equivalent of a woman’s share of her family’s estate is ridiculous on the face of it. The dowry portion rarely approached the amount awarded to male descendants, and real property was seldom, if ever, included. Moreover, in a family with several daughters, the later-born frequently received less than the eldest.<sup>38</sup>

The argument, that the dowry system responded to the law of supply and demand, is a specious one as well.<sup>39</sup> Presumably men paid a bride-price in the early Middle Ages because women were scarce. Subsequently, women paid a dowry in the later period because men were supposedly in short supply.<sup>40</sup> The above argument makes very little sense if we accept Klapisch-Zuber’s figures on the imbalance between men and women in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, pointing to a definite shortage of women in that period, just when dowry inflation was reaching its peak.<sup>41</sup>

Diane Owen Hughes offers one explanation for the institution of the dowry, when she notes that the exclusion of dowered women from the familial estate had "an unmistakable flavor of masculine privilege."<sup>42</sup> In Genoa, women were not only barred from the estates of their fathers, but their descendants were also unable to profit from the maternal fortunes.<sup>43</sup> In Florence, if there were not brothers or nephews to inherit, females could recover only up to one-fourth of the estate, with the rest going to agnatic kin.<sup>44</sup> Klapisch-Zuber quotes Hughes to support her supposition that the exclusion of women from the familial estate caused them to become wives "inevitably more subjected to their husbands."<sup>45</sup>—but, were they?

In his article on Venetian dowry customs, Stanley Chojnacki reveals that not only fathers, but mothers as well, were called upon to provide dowries for their daughters. In cases, also, where an unmarried girl lacked paternal relatives to provide for her, her maternal grandfather or other maternal ascendants assumed the responsibility.<sup>46</sup> This is more than a suggestion of some matrilineal economic control. Interesting, too, is the constant rise in the ratio of women's wills to men's. Since the increase occurred after the depredations of the Black Death, perhaps women were more aware of their double vulnerability to plague and childbirth, and thus became concerned with testacy.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of dowry inflation, and a lowering of the age of marriage, even younger women were able to dispose of larger estates, and their first concern was for their daughters.<sup>48</sup> After the middle of the fourteenth century, both frequency and size of women's contributions rose, by the early fifteenth century amounting to more than one-third of parental contributions.<sup>49</sup> Chojnacki stresses the social significance of this maternal involvement, which he interprets as an increasingly larger role being played by those much less committed to the paternal lineage.<sup>50</sup> Surely, greater involvement indicated greater influence and control by women.

Can it be that Florentines differed from the rest of Italy? Were they more tyrannical, more arrogant, more fiercely chauvinistic than the Venetians or the Genoese? Are Florentine women the "subservient" wives Klapisch-Zuber speaks of? Well, possibly. Thomas Kuehn introduces the institution of the *mundualdus* in support of this view.<sup>51</sup>

The *mundualdus* was an adult male appointed to assist a Florentine woman in her legal transactions, in theory a disinterested party. The important fact was that women were not empowered to act on their own. An equally important fact was that Florence was the only major Tuscan city to preserve this institution in the precise sense as a guardian over women. Kuehn asserts: "The supposed natural inferiority of women justified not only a legal inferiority, but a social inferiority."<sup>52</sup> It may be, then, that Florentine women were in actuality more subservient.

Since we have seen that many superfluous upper-class girls were relegated to the convent, was domestic service a viable alternative for the poorer girl? It would seem from Klapisch-Zuber's statistics that more domestic servants were drawn from the ranks of married and widowed women than from the unmarried—a ratio of about two to three. It is unfortunate that again we cannot rely on Klapisch-Zuber, since her figures do not agree with her conclusions. While on one page she states that she is using a sample of 132 women, on the next page the number has dropped to 111 women. Of these, she claims 52 are unmarried and 80 are married. These numbers do add up to the original 132 women, but she further avers that these are 44% and 56%, respectively, which is inaccurate, regardless of which number correctly represents the universe of her sample.<sup>53</sup>

However, domestic service could have been a good thing for the undowered girl, or for the woman who intended to reject matrimony altogether. There are a significant number of contracts which promised dowers to girls when they reached marriageable age, and others were guaranteed a home until death if they were not to marry.<sup>54</sup>

This, then, was a Florentine woman's destiny during the fifteenth century. Separation, lifelong alienation, and then death, if not from the plague, then certainly from the toll of child-bearing.<sup>55</sup> As David Herlihy has put it, these are "bleak" statistics.<sup>56</sup>

If the statistics are bleak just of themselves, it is a shame that Klapisch-Zuber did not let them stand on their own, without overstatement. In too many cases, poor choices of support material or inaccurate figures cast some doubt on the study, and her determination to see discrimination even where unnecessary further weakens her thesis. One

must acknowledge that she has performed an enormous service to history by her efforts to shed light on the structures of the family and the role of women. One must note as well, however, the pitfalls inherent in such an undertaking. A little more care with regard to these pitfalls would have made Klapisch-Zuber's contribution truly outstanding.

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## Notes

1. David Herlihy's remark in the Foreword that the *ricordanze* "admit of some statistical manipulation," is more apposite than he realizes, and unwittingly ironic. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. viii.

2. Ibid. p. 2. After 1427 *catasti* were limited to Florence and the immediate surroundings (*contado*).

3. Ibid. Klapisch-Zuber and colleagues embarked on an analysis of the 1427 *catasto* some 20 years ago—an exhausting, although not exhaustive, task.

4. Ibid. p. 23.

5. Ibid. p. 26.

6. Ibid. This reduction constituted a shocking loss of 72% of the population in only one century.

7. Ibid. p. 27. Klapisch-Zuber has some further suggestions which she does not introduce here (chapter 5).

8. Ibid. This is an inconsistency on Klapisch-Zuber's part since she notes the toll which childbirth exacted from women.

9. Ages for women were down from twenty-five at the end of the thirteenth century to sixteen in 1371. Men's ages fell from forty to twenty-four. Ibid. p. 29.

10. Ibid. p. 31.

11. Ibid. pp. 138ff. She describes the circumstances of this practice, taking her information from the *ricordanze*.

12. Wetnurse.

13. Ibid. p. 134. Klapisch-Zuber states that between 1302 and 1399, out of fifteen families known to have put children out to nurse, only two did not come from the highest rank.

14. Ibid. It is uncertain, as Klapisch-Zuber points out, whether the above represents an actual change in societal practices or simply reflects a trend toward better record keeping.

15. Ibid. pp. 136, 143. Nurses *in casa* were paid approximately eighteen to twenty *fiorini* a year, as compared to a nurse in her own home, who received from nine to fifteen *fiorini* a year depending on the distance of her home from Florence. These *fiorini* were *fiorini da serva* which amounted to about 4 *lire* to a *fiorino*—not as valuable as a *fiorino d'oro*.

16. Ibid. p. 137. One ironic side effect of the practice of wet nursing was that the nurse, herself, often had to find an even poorer woman to nurse her own child, and paid out of her own wages. There is something horribly humorous about this "stair-step" system of child-rearing, as children were passed from household to household in the manner of rented commercial commodities.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid. p. 158. Klapisch-Zuber acknowledges this fact but feels it is a rare instance, but without any other evidence that it is rare.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid. p. 105.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid. p. 104. At Santa Maria della Scala, for example, there were 98 girls recorded, as opposed to 41 boys.

23. Ibid. During the years from 1430–39, a period of war and poverty, two-thirds of the foundlings in San Gallo were girls.

24. Ibid. pp. 103–105. Klapisch-Zuber makes a puzzling choice of examples when she cites figures from the baptismal records of San Giovanni to "reflect" the practice of abandonment. She states that there was a ratio of 104 boys to 100 girls. This is a normal birth ratio, as she, herself, remarks.

25. Ibid. p. 104. Mortality rates were particularly high in the hospices—from 26.6% during the "relatively good years" between 1445–47, to an appalling 50% in the years up to 1451, for an average of 40.3% in that short time.

26. Ibid. p. 109. A girl would generally take the veil between nine and eleven years of age, and make her final vows by age thirteen.

27. Ibid. p. 111. The *catasto* does report one 11-year old boy and one 13-year old boy married to girls of 12.

28. Ibid. pp. 118ff.

29. Ibid. p. 120, pp. 123ff. Widows were considerably more numerous than widowers in Tuscan society (13.6% against 2.4% respectively), with the highest ratio in Florence itself (25% widows, 4% widowers). Men remarried much more easily and up to a much older age than women (widowers were generally over 70). It seemed to be much more difficult for "mature" women to remarry. Women who were widowed before 20 remarried two-thirds of the time; those widowed between 30 and 39 remarried only 11% of the time. Men remarried as much as 75% of the time up to age 60.

30. Ibid. p. 123.

31. Ibid. A woman's kin came to claim her immediately after the funeral, when it was deemed honorable for her to depart with her family.



32. Ibid. pp. 134–127.

33. Ibid. p. 128f.

34. Ibid. p. 130.

35. Ibid. p. 130f. “. . . since [women] cannot take their children nor keep them with them, and they cannot remain alone without harm, . . . it is almost perforce that mothers see themselves constrained to choose the best compromise. But it is not to be doubted that they think constantly of their children . . .” The master of ceremonies, after an astonished speech about the perspicacity of women, awards the victory to the ladies.

36. Even if he were not representative, he proved that there were at least a few men sensitive to the plight of women.

37. Diane Owen Hughes, “From Bridgeprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe,” *Journal of Family History*, 3: 262–296 (1978), p. 282. Stanley Chojnacki, “Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4: 571–600 (1975), p. 571.

38. Hughes. pp. 280–281. To save even more on dowries, it was a common practice to simply lock daughters away in convents, which were often spoken of as being little better than brothels. The will of Leone Morosini, in 1342, provided his daughter Lucia a dowry of 576 ducats, plus a *corredum* of 346 ducats. If his then-pregnant wife were to give birth to a daughter, Morosini had made a provision for that daughter to be placed in a convent and given an annuity of ten ducats, a considerable savings. Chojnacki. p. 576.

39. Both Hughes and Klapisch-Zuber attack it, and I must concur. Hughes. p. 285. Klapisch-Zuber, p. 215.

40. Hughes. p. 285. Due partially, it seems, to the practice of primogeniture, which did not apply in Italy. Hughes also refers to “collective restraint” as a probable cause, but does not define this phrase.

41. Chojnacki. p. 571. Klapisch-Zuber. pp. 102ff.

42. Hughes. p. 280.

43. Ibid.

44. Klapisch-Zuber. p. 214.

45. Ibid. p. 213.

46. Chojnacki. p. 577. Maternal wills provided most of the information regarding dowry bequests.

47. Ibid. pp. 584–585. Many of the wills were drawn up by women who were pregnant. According to Chojnacki’s speculations, the number may have been as high as 49.2%, since 31 of the wills were drawn up by women who may have been pregnant, but did not so state.

48. Chojnacki. pp. 584–586.

49. Ibid. pp. 586–587.

50. Ibid. pp. 586ff. This meant that property could be more widely diffused into two, or more, separate lineages.

51. Thomas Kuehn, "*Cum consensu mundualdus*: Legal Guardianship of Women in Quattrocento Florence," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 13: 309–333 (1982), pp. 309–311.

52. Ibid. pp. 318–319. Canon law affirmed women's rights to exercise a form of legal control over their husbands. Jurists, however, were willing to accept statutory restrictions on the legal capacities of women on the grounds that they were "protecting" women because of their "simplicity" and supposed weaknesses of mind and body. Ibid. pp. 309ff.

53. Klapisch-Zuber. pp. 172–173.

54. Ibid. pp. 165–173. Practically speaking, the system seems to have benefitted widows in distress and married women facing an economic crisis more than the unmarried.

55. From *ricordanze* statements, pregnancy seems to have been continuous. Wet-nursing may have been one way to avoid a double burden. One Antonio di ser Tommaso Masi reported that his wife, who died at 57, had given him 36 children, 28 of whom were put out to nurse. He proudly stated that, at the time of her death, the poor exhausted woman still had 9 living male children. Klapisch-Zuber. p. 135, n. 11.

56. Ibid. Foreword p. ix.

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## Academic Year 1986–1987

### Visiting professors

#### *Winter 1987*

Alessandro Falassi, University for Foreigners, Siena, taught an undergraduate course entitled “Tradition and Innovation in Italian Culture.”

Giuseppe Velli, University of Venice, led two graduate seminars, one on Dante and one on Boccaccio.

#### *Spring 1987*

Renzo Bragantini, University of Venice, taught an undergraduate course entitled “Italian Literature in the Twentieth Century” and a graduate course on Italo Svevo.

### Lectures

Ugo Vignuzzi, “Nuovi approfondimenti sulla storia della lingua italiana” (October 17, 1986).

Antonino Borsellino, “Orfeo e Pan: Sul simbolismo della pastorale” (November 13, 1986).

Alessandro Lombardi, “The Banking System in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Presentation” (November 18, 1986).

Teresa De Lauretis, "Calvino and the Amazons: A Feminist Reading of *If in a Winter's Night a Traveller . . .*" (November 20, 1986).

Biancamaria Frabotta, "La poesia femminile italiana dal dopoguerra ad oggi" (November 24, 1986).

Vittore Branca and Victoria Kirkham, "Boccaccio Visualizzato" (February 19, 1987).

Giuseppe Velli, "Dante e la memoria della poesia classica" (February 27, 1987).

Sergio Zatti, "L'inchiesta del Furioso" (April 1, 1987).

### Events

"L'amore nel tempo," a recital in Italian by Raf Vallone (October 30, 1986).

"La messa è finita," a screening of Nanni Moretti's latest film with a presentation by the director (November 1, 1986).

"Italian Composers of the XIX and XX Centuries," original guitar music performed by Roberto Ferraresi (November 20, 1986).

"Marsilio Ficino Today," a colloquium co-sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and the Departments of Classics, Italian, and French (February 24, 1987).

Two seminars on the health benefits of Italian food, a luncheon feast of Italian Mediterranean cuisine, and a wine reception co-sponsored by the Italian Trade Commission, the Department of Italian, and the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (March 21, 1987).

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**Ph.D. Dissertations**  
**1986–1987**

Del Giudice, Luisa, "Cecilia (Nigra 3): A Traditional Narrative Ballad in Socio-Literary Context," director, Lucia Re.

Donato, Clorinda, "Inventory of the *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon*: A Comparative Study with Diderot's *Encyclopédie*," director, Franco Betti.

Giurgea, Adrian, "Theatre of the Flesh: The Carnival of Venice and the Emergence of the Modern European Theatre," director, Franco Betti.

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